

"Adopt the pace of nature; her secret is patience."

--- Aristophanes

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Season of hope

HUMANITY rings in the New Year with renewed confidence. past the trauma of a wasted and terrible season that tested every individual's patience across the globe – and in the most worrisome situations in living history. The end for killer Covid-19 is not in sight and new threats from within the same virus family are arising. Yet, there now exists a sense of optimism that the worst is over and, worse come to worse, we shall live with the virus. The planned vaccine roll-out, for which dry runs have started, will further boost this sense of optimism. The shadow of fear is lingering, though. Many cities have clamped night curfew on New Year's Eve to apply brakes on the revelries that normally touched the climax at midnight. Restrictions did dampen the spirit of the festivities; and so was the scenario for Christmas too worldwide. It's not time yet to take risks or feel free. Social distancing norms and restrictions on travel by air and rail too are still in place. This year too will, in part at least, be a difficult year as several restrictions including on education continue.

A silver-lining amid the gloom that gathered over the horizon since March last was that essential activities of our public life have resumed after a near-total halt for a few months, plagued as they were by the shutdown of the nation and the iterations of lockdowns. Industrial and agricultural activities have regained pace. Elections in Bihar saw mass participation and yet the pandemic situation remained under control. Parliament did an urgent sitting, as also the state assemblies. Social life remains worse-hit as both restrictions and the fear factor keep people largely indoors; its effects on the economy rated heavy. Restaurants and the hospitality industry, as also the aviation industry were the worst hit in terms of sectors while the plight of the huge migrant population earned the sympathy of one and all. Those in the health care sector strained their nerves to the full to keep hopes up for humanity across continents. The world ended the year with a reassurance that the worst is perhaps over and a new sense of hope is in the air. As lights started beaming from Australia and spread across the globe over the time last night, passing through Asia, Africa and Europe ended up in the Americas, it was time to say 'three cheers' to the New Year – a limp from a year of hopelessness to a season of hope.

2020- Did we learn anything at all?

By Patricia Mukhim

2020 will be remembered not just for the pandemic but the hardships it has caused a large section of Indians, which includes a sizeable chunk of our own people here who live a hand to mouth existence. It is curious that despite all the interventions, poverty, malnutrition, stunting of children is on the rise. Maternal and infants deaths have spiked especially during Covid times and laid bare our decrepit health care infrastructure. One is unsure if serious interventions in the health sector are on the cards or whether the financial crunch will deprive the health sector of the much needed resources. As it is, Meghalaya allocates a bare minimum for education and health. No wonder we are neither truly educated nor fully healthy.

The year that was has been most challenging for the Government of Meghalaya in terms of resources available. But even if there was no Covid, the roads in Shillong city would have shown up as being the most sub-standard. Those in Government, especially those heading the Public Works Department ought to take a round of the city to witness the extremely poor quality roads which can only be compared to those of Nagaland. These roads will now get a makeover which will be washed away by the first heavy shower because our road engineers have not been trained to make roads in areas with heavy rainfall. Actually the reason is because they have used sub-standard articles to cover up the mess underneath because the bulk of the money goes into private pockets. It's a sad commentary on the state of Meghalaya that we have not heard of a single case of corruption taken up by the Chief Vigilance Commissioner, despite blatant misuse of public funds by the PHE and PWD Departments, among others.

And while the post of the Lok Ayukta has been created the institution is crippled by lack of resources and manpower. From all indications the government is not really keen on empowering the Lok Ayukta because it has to be made answerable for

its acts of omission and commission. Hence every institution created for whistle-blowers is running at half-speed. It's not a good idea to be fastidious and acrimonious while critiquing governance because so many factors go into the process of governing a state. Firstly it is a lot of grunt work and in any system there are those that work relentlessly and others that simply work to earn a salary. Having the best minds and skills does not necessarily guarantee one a job in the government. Those that have neither mostly get employed because that too is an accepted part of the recruitment process.

A state that is soon arriving at its 50th milestone has nothing much to show by way of achievements. Perhaps, if the Inner Line Permit is granted by the Shah of the BJP, now that the saffron party has also joined the ILP bandwagon, then there may yet be a feather in the cap of the chief of the MDA Government. But what the ILP will achieve twenty years hence could be a negative growth rate with Meghalaya becoming more dependent on the Centre and its youth having to leave the state to look for jobs outside. We can also say goodbye to any other institution building dream. Do any of the ILP states have national or international institutions for human resource development? Would the Institute for Hotel Management or IIM Shillong for instance have been set up in Nagaland or Mizoram or Arunachal Pradesh? And who actually wants the ILP? Has a survey been carried out?

In any case, Meghalaya has been a state with a huge silent majority which includes its well-heeled intellectuals and academics that will not go against populist demands. NEHU with its Economics, Political Science and Sociology Departments should have done a cost-benefit analysis of the ILP. That would have enlightened those who don't much understand what the ILP entails. Some of NEHU's leading lights with doctorates to boot should have given their considered opinions but that's like asking for the

moon. In any case NEHU is too embroiled in its internecine politics to be able to contribute anything of lasting value to the society. The well-paid intelligentsia with the luxury of thinking remains silent while issues are hijacked by those that have not the faintest idea on how the ILP will strangle the fledgling economy of Meghalaya.

A silent majority is a danger to democracy. For years Meghalaya has been held hostage to pressure groups. The railways are yet to enter the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Here too no cost-benefit analysis has been carried out. We are all victims of the politics of representation. A few hundred people out of three million citizens decide what's good or bad for us and we have to remain silent and acquiescent or pay the price. We are willy-nilly co-opted to be on the side of those who oppose every progressive idea. The reason why we have elections is because the constitutionally elected representative can be held accountable for decisions taken on behalf of the constituents. Representation implies acting on the expressed wishes of citizens. On the ILP do all the citizens of Meghalaya actually agree on it? This writer travelled extensively to interview stakeholders in tourism if they know what the ILP is all about. They do not have any idea what it implies. All they know is that tourism will be affected for sure.

The MRSSA which is a faux ILP now says that day "travelers" from Guwahati to Shillong and return will not be entertained. Anyone entering Meghalaya as a tourist has to spend a minimum of two days here. What happens if a similar Act is applied by the Assam Government and people from Meghalaya needing to seek medical assistance or attend to any business in Guwahati are told they must stay back at least two days or will not be allowed to enter the state of Assam? Of course Assam is too benevolent to even think of such a quid pro quo but Meghalaya is not on the right track as far as the surveillance on Indian citizens is concerned. Protectionism is bad

because it kills competition which is the fundamental premise of every successful enterprise. The MRSSA and ILP are all instruments of protectionism. Protectionism is popular primarily for political reasons, not economic reasons. Harvard scholars call it economic suicide.

Those in favour of protectionist policies also claim they are protecting the 'jaibynriew.' Can they give a detailed analysis of how that protection, which amounts to economic isolation will benefit the people of Meghalaya? This bellicose sub-nationalism is built on irrational fears of the future. The ILP and MRSSA are built on a catastrophic, apocalyptic vision of the world around us. To the uninitiated the above instruments seem like the only way out. But how can they be the way out when they are likely to choke the economy and there are no imaginative proposals from the proponents of the ILP on our economic future? Meghalaya is not and cannot survive as an island in the 21st century. It needs to engage with the world around it. The ILP on the contrary is an unrealistic policy proposal that intends to stifle that opportunity. One can understand the exhaustion and pessimism of the voters who see no change with every successive government but the pressure groups too have been there for decades. Some among them have joined politics but showed no inclination to break away from the road much trodden – the road of corruption, of selfish business interests and of hanging on to power at all costs. Sadly the voters have time and again been pushed to bear false witness against reality as they are doing now by their studied silence.

2021 has arrived but for the people of Meghalaya there is no promise of a secure future, only toxic distortions of how that future will pan out, even as more leaders are created for the next elections. And that's the way the cookie crumbles. Meanwhile between now and the next elections we will continue to hear the over-wrought bellowing about the monster in the closet – the demonic other who is the cause of our existential identities.

COVID-19 has tragically exposed the inequity in the country's system Massive investment in public health, need of the hour in India

By Dr. Arun Mitra

Warning by the WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus for the need to make greater investment in Public Health system so that 'world is better prepared to meet the future pandemics' must be taken seriously. He has further stressed that 'public health system with all – of – government and all – of – society one health approach is essential to make the world safer for our children to inherit'. For a sustainable world we need better public health.

Soviet Union was the first country in the world to give constitutional right to the people for free healthcare. This was affirmed in the Soviet Constitution of 1936 as one of the basic rights of the Soviet people, along with rights to education and right to work.

The National Health Services (NHS) in England was born out of a long-held ideal that good healthcare should be available to all, regardless of wealth. At its

health, that treats health as techno-dependent and amenable to commodification. Under the influence of international monopoly corporates the WHO took position to increase partnership with multinational companies. As a result the institution which was supposed to work for inclusive healthcare policies took lead in destroying its own agenda set at Alma Ata in 1978. In our country influence on the policies by the World Bank is evident in 1980s whereby health came to be viewed as a profitable business.

Thus in our country we find that the public sector is now responsible for the preventive services while the private sector on the other hand is taking lead in advanced tertiary care. We have seen exorbitant growth of corporate hospitals. This advanced care is out of reach of low- and even middle income group. It is being projected that the public sector health institutions have failed in



World Health Organization

launch by the then minister of health, Aneurin Bevan, on 5 July 1948, it had at its heart three core principles: that it meet the needs of everyone, that it be free at the point of delivery and it be based on clinical needs and not ability to pay.

In India Bhore committee under the chairmanship of Sir Joseph Bhore in its report in 1946 and recommended that "the health programme should be developed on a foundation of preventive health work and that 'If the nation's health has to be built, such activities should proceed side by side those concerned with treatment of patients'. The report further said that no individual should be denied to secure adequate medical care because of inability to pay; health programme must lay special emphasis on preventive work; health service should be located close to the people; medical services should be free to all without any distinction and doctor should be a social physician. The committee also observed that health and development are inter-dependent and improvement in other sectors like water supply, sanitation, nutrition, employment lead to improvement in health status.

The Public Health definition by CEA Winslow a seminal figure in public health that "It is the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting physical and mental health and efficiency through organized community effort for the sanitation of the environment, the control of community infection, education of individuals in principles of personal hygiene, the organisation of medical and nursing services for the early diagnosis and preventive treatment of diseases, and the development of the service machinery which will ensure to every individual in the community a standard of living adequate for the maintenance of health" is till date the key definition accepted worldwide.

In the first few decades of post-independence period healthcare was based on these principles. During that period much of the health care was developed in state sector with a special emphasis on the need of basic healthcare services at the community level.

But from this holistic perspective there occurred a policy shift towards

providing the services, therefore need for corporate entry. There is little talk to improve health determinants like improved sanitation, clean drinking water supply, housing, job security and increase in capacity to spend on nutrition.

No wonder the government recognises the fact that every year 6.3 crore people are pushed below poverty line because of Out of Pocket Expenditure (OPE) on health. Even the Ayushman Bharat covers only 50 crore people out of 138 crore and that too only for those who are admitted for indoor care in the hospital. The patients requiring only OPD care are not covered. As a result the already marginalised sections of the society have been further excluded from quality healthcare benefits.

Various studies have concluded that to ensure comprehensive primary healthcare there is need to enhance public spending on health to minimum of 5% of the GDP. As per the National Health Accounts (NHA) Estimate for 2014-15, the Government Health Expenditure (GHE) per person per year is just Rs.1108/-. This is in contrast to the Out of Pocket Expenditure (OPE) of Rs.2394/- which comes out to be 63% of total health expenditure which is Rs.3286/- per person. Even this expenditure is not homogenous. The spending on health varies on socio-economic status, gender, religion, caste and geography.

To improve the health of the people drastic steps need to be taken at various levels. Health should be declared a fundamental right irrespective of religion, age, sex, caste and socio economic status. The government owes its responsibility to deliver health to all by ensuring universal access to quality healthcare, education and other day to day needs. For this there should be continuous evaluation of health status of the people. Health should get due place in the political agenda, and the policy making bodies.

The COVID-19 has thoroughly exposed inequities in the healthcare delivery system. It has exposed the level of poverty and exclusion. It has exposed our unpreparedness to meet big health challenges. In the pursuit of profit making we have drifted away from our real goals in health. It is time to change our priorities. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Check picnickers around Umiam

Editor,
Your report "Umling ticks right boxes, mostly" (ST Dec 30, 2020), is reassuring. That over 800 tourists are entering daily, in spite of regulations, raises hopes that tourism industry will not die because of lack of tourists. However, my hunch is that a bulk of these tourists are from Assam. For these tourists this is the season for them to enjoy picnic, excursions and sight-seeing. In the past, in December-January the lake area used to be crowded with picnickers from Assam. Many of these parties used to be quite a sight. They would choose a site close to the main road for the people to get a glimpse of what they do. There are times when some get drunk and create nuisance. Of course, revellers are all alike in this respect. Our domestic picnickers are also known for such proclivity. Be that as it may, this year so far we haven't seen the Assam picnickers in Umiam area. Maybe, COVID has a lot to do with it and now with regulations in place, the picnic revellers are yet to be seen. I feel, the concerned authorities like District Council, MeCEL etc

should identify picnic spots around Umiam Lake and charge a small fee from the users. This is just to ensure that hordes of picnickers from outside do not light a fire anywhere and everywhere or litter the area and leave the environment affected.

Yours etc.,
Gerald C. Mawroh,
Via email.

Thoughts on New Year

Editor,
As the new year dawns on us, I send new year's greetings from the USA to all of your readers. I am a regular subscriber of your esteemed daily and I wish a happy new year to you and your team. There are many in my country who have a notion that life is going to be a lot better once 2020 is gone. That's not true at all. COVID-19 which is everybody's bugbear, is not going to disappear just because we are going to turn a new page in the calendar. In the USA, UK and many other countries in the western hemisphere the situation is still grim. Yes, with the change of guard in the White House, there is every possibility of a better handling of the situation. But that is not going to happen on January 20 when the new president assumes office. I feel people

everywhere must maintain vigilance for another six to eight months as we prepare to take a jab as a possible prophylactic against Coronavirus.

Let us hope that by the time we welcome 2022, the world would have rid itself of COVID and the familiar hustle-bustle is back.

Yours etc.,
Ray Roppe,
Via email.

2020: What a year it was!

Editor,
2020 has shown us humans what it means to live and stay alive in this world. Yes, it's been a year now and we are trying to get back to our lives but nothing is certain except that COVID-19 is still here with us. I am spelling the virus in capital letters not out of fear but with a determination that it cannot and will not be victorious in annihilating humankind though it may have created a space for itself in the history of the world.

Sadly 2020 had been a year of trial and pain; of death and destruction of livelihoods. We were forced to change our way of life. Wearing a mask, washing our hands and maintaining social distancing had never been more imposing. Humans are social animals by nature yet today to stay

safe and to survive, socialising has taken an entirely different meaning. We socialise but by using different platforms such as mobile phones, Whatsapp, social media, etc. 2020 was indeed a year that forced us to practice social distancing in letter and spirit! The two words have never been more popular than they are now.

As we close the old year and usher in 2021, I look back to the times when our country was under lockdown; a time that took us by surprise for it was a difficult and terrible time for all. It exposed the glaring realities of our lives! While some did not need to worry about food, safely locked within the comfort of their homes, many others were in penury. I remember the faces of those that were hungry and scared and how some would count the number of days when they would still get at least one meal a day. Still others were anxious about buying food for the house when the little money they had was exhausted. The migrant workers and their plight that flashed on our television screens were yet another horrendous side of the pandemic. However amidst all this, if there was one good thing that 2020 did was to awaken in us fellow feelings and camaraderie. We saw humanity in action. In our own state,

organisations and individuals wore the mantle of compassion and kindness. Many came out to help those in need of food and subsistence.

This uninhibited regard for fellow humans and the will and determination to not allow those in need to stay hungry was nothing short of the presence of a godly spirit within them. I bow my head in reverence before each one of them.

I also take this time to salute our front liners; the doctors, nurses, policemen, the municipal workers, and all those who put their lives at stake fulfilling their duties while we stayed safe at home. At the risk of being infected, they plunged into the combat zone to save lives. Our medical team stayed away from their hearths and homes, their family and loved ones, answering their call for duties and safeguarding those they love, lest they pass on the virus to them. Stories of how the PPE sets and safety gears to protect them were cumbersome and heavy and yet how they braved all odds, will become part of our history. Our protectors and guardians of the law moved out on the streets keeping a check on the citizens so they do not defy orders. They kept themselves away from their family only to make sure that the citizens stay safe with theirs. The municipal workers without whose service we

would have lived with filth and dirt deserve special respect. Without them it would not have been possible to free our houses and streets of garbage. Those were challenging times yet we saw how hard they worked amidst fear of being infected. While some were fortunate enough not to be infected by the deadly virus, others lost their lives to it. To all those who lost their near and dear ones, prayers are for them to be strong and keep their faith intact.

Who would have thought that the world would be crippled and come to a standstill? Yet it did. Now all of us together yet apart need to fight against COVID-19. Nations and governments are trying to find a cure to this virus and put it to rest. The million dollar question lurking in our minds is what the year 2021 has in store for us? How different will it be from 2020? Well, there is no way by which we can foresee the future. However what we as individuals can do is to work towards keeping ourselves safe for only then can we keep our loved ones and our fellow human beings safe.

As I bid adieu to 2020 I wholeheartedly welcome 2021 to usher in peace, harmony, love, good health and above all to retain humanity in its fullest form.

Yours etc.,
Jenieffer Dkhar,
Via email

Eat and drink to your heart's content in 2021

Arguably 2020 has seen the biggest shift in food trends: not only were families forced to cook more and together at home, but many turned to cultivating vegetable gardens for fresh produce. Sales of seeds skyrocketed around the world. People found a new respect and understanding for the process of 'farm to table'.

Experimentation in the home kitchen also thrived. As most people had more time, cooking became a family affair and was more enjoyable. Some products were harder to access so one had to be inventive. There was less waste, and one became more conscious of what we were eating.

But going forward, as we enter a brand new year, celebrity chef Sarah Todd believes we will see an increase in plant-based food and sustainable eating.

"I believe there has been a paradigm shift in eating habits. The last 12 months have instilled a new mindset that will continue in 2021. We will think before we spend, meaning home cooking will continue, farmers approach to marketing has matured and customers are now more aware of what is available," the chef told *IANSLife*.

Adding: "Restaurants and cafes have been the hardest hit during the pandemic which affects farmers, workers and proprietors. People are making a conscious effort to support them by eating out when they can. This will increase as confidence grows."

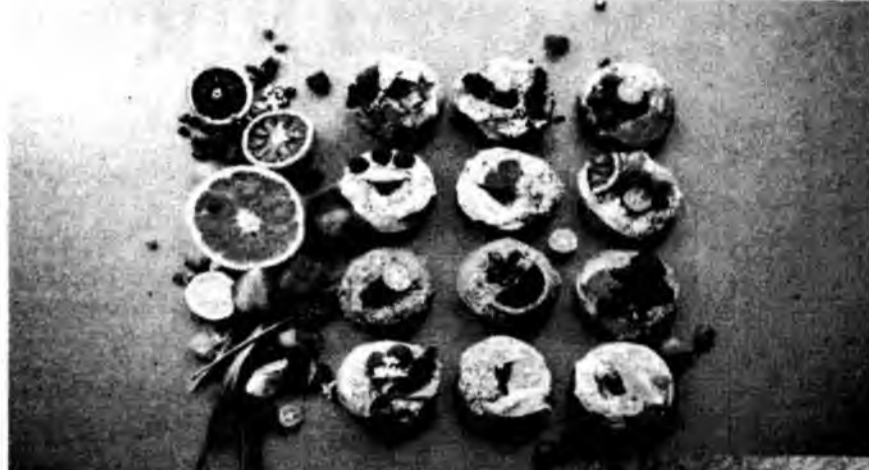
Chef Vineet Manocha, Vice President Culinary, Lite Bite Foods feels the year 2020 brought dramatic changes in eating and living habits with "local being the new sustainable... More and more use of local resources, produce, ingredients and equipments and focus on seasonal produce," he added. Manocha lists down a few trends to look out for in 2021:

Healthy all the way: Health food is totally in and immunity boosting foods are trending. The focus will be on choosing the ingredients carefully and eating well in the age of dieting. Wholesome nutritious food will be planned by us which is well balanced as per the principles of Ayurveda. Food also affects your mental health and in this age of pandemic anxiety, it's very important that we eat calming, nutritional food.

Heirloom and ancient ingredients: There will be a lot of experimentation on Heirloom varieties like ragi, barley, millets, teff and spelt. More and more focus will be on lost ingredients and lost recipes. Home chefs are bringing in a lot of traction on ancient recipes. It's not difficult in India to move back to sustainable heirloom ingredients as we just have to look back two generations. There is a lot of focus on reviving the old cooking methods, cookware, techniques and recipes. There is a growing appreciation for Ghee and cold-pressed seed oils which were used by our ancestors.

Rise of neighbourhood foodpreneurs: With growing awareness and campaigns about "Support Local Businesses", many trained chefs will turn entrepreneurs, providing personalised, customized food solutions to limited customer base. This is also supported by the demand for "food with a story". Small menus, customised to needs, changing frequently to provide variety, local sustainability, daily subscription of meal kits, unpretentious dark kitchens etc. will get a further boost this year.

Upcycled food: We are all aware of the threat of food security and rising population. The severity of food



wastage is catching up as a trend with the chefs. There will be a growing trend to reduce food wastage as much as possible and develop recipes which can make peels delicious. The trend does not just revolve around Blissful food from waste but also cocktails and beverages using food waste, peels and ingredients like apple pulp, orange peels etc. Blissful recipes will be a big trend in 2021.

DESSERT TRENDS FOR 2021

In the midst of so much uncertainty in 2020, treating took centre stage as it delivered our daily dose of 'small happy'; so as we step into 2021, what better way to celebrate than by looking forward to the delicious and tantalising treats that will emerge over the next twelve months. The Baileys Treat Report 2021 compiled by Baileys, with leading food futurologist Dr. Morgaine Gaye present delicious trends for 2021.

A Drop of Self-care: Unsurprisingly, everyone has been indulging in a bit more self-care in 2020 and the self-care kick will continue. People will be indulging themselves in new botanical drinks that offer qualities like 'calm', 'focus', 'glow' and 'rest', and new fermented beverages like hop water; a non-alcoholic drink with a slight beer or ale taste, will be bigger than ever.

Oat Everything: the humble porridge oats will go centre stage as oat-based milk chocolates, ice creams, cheeses, yoghurts, and even double cream are coming our way.

I Should Cacao!: Cacao pulp, the bit you don't see as it's generally discarded when making chocolate, is a sweet and fruity flesh. You can also expect to see it as a flavourful alternative to coconut water, topped with eye catching edible flowers for the perfect non-alcoholic refresher.

Japanese Indulgence: Japan is a haven for delicious, whimsical treats that will put a smile on your face, and we'll be seeing a massive influx of Japanese inspired wonders including wobbly, fat, pillow-like pancakes and the Taiyaki fish, a soft waffle-like cones in the shape of a fish is stuffed to the gills with ice cream, sprinkles, sauces and wafers.

Spread the Love: Savoury spreads are getting a makeover as they turn to treats. Add a touch of luxury to toast as Sloe Gin spreads and Champagne butters will make the humble piece of bread into a meal fit for



royalty.

How's this for a glow-up?: We're talking completely edible algae that will find its way into our favourite cocktails, giving them an incredible other-worldly appearance that will be hard to ignore. Will someone pass us a Glowtini?

As Light as Air: On the coattails of the whipped Dalgona coffee, this treating trend is only growing popularity in 2021. Air will be whipped, injected and stuffed into everything from ice cream to candy floss, giving a light texture that leaves us craving more.

Extra Sweet(s): They've been around for a few years, but in 2021, some classics get a gloriously adventurous treating make-over as the macaron and Danish pastry get whimsical. Introducing the Macaron Ice Cream Sandwich and the Nougat Crown, with all the muted tones and flavours getting set aside for over the top colour and tastes... already building up a sizeable following in Los Angeles.

Let's hope in the New Year we can finally raise a glass and cheer while we focus on clean and mindful eating. (*IANSLife*)



The compassionate side of Ratan Tata

It was their shared empathy for homeless dogs that sparked an unlikely friendship.

In 2014, Shantanu Naidu, an automobile design engineer in his early twenties, developed an innovation to save the local strays from being run over by speeding cars. Ratan Tata, himself known for his compassion for stray dogs, took note. Impressed, he not only decided to invest in the venture, but over the years became a mentor, boss and an unexpectedly dear friend to Shantanu, inspiring new ventures and learnings.

"I Came Upon a Lighthouse" (HarperCollins) is an honest, light-hearted telling of this uncommon bond between a millennial and an octogenarian that gives glimpses of a beloved Indian icon in a warm light.

"A shared concern for the welfare of the homeless, hungry, ill-treated and abandoned dogs and cats brought Shantanu and me together. He and his young friends had been bootstrapping a small start-up in Pune to feed, care for and find homes for these poor animals," Tata says in a Note in the book.

"He earned recognition when they made reflective collars, based solely on passion and kindness for animals. Knowing my love for dogs, he wrote to my office, not even expecting a response. I was impressed by what they had done and the compassion that Shantanu and the college kids had shown by investing their personal time and resources.

"I decided to invest in his start-up, and they received not just support but also encouragement to grow it through personal involvement. I was also impressed by his sincerity and offered him a job on the completion of his studies. Shantanu took the job and joined me in my office. He shares time between assisting me in our philanthropic activities, the development of the Tata Trusts'



(L) The author, Shantanu Naidu, with Ratan Tata. (R) The cover of the book

long-term plans and helping with startup investments.

"He has become a member of the small team which is driven by their desire to help others. Each day has a lesson to be learnt and each day is one of fulfilment that he has brought happiness to someone, or sadness at not having been able to do so. I hope Shantanu can be a shining light of kindness who will continue to be driven by genuine goodwill, and I am thankful that he is able to help others from deep within his heart," Tata writes.

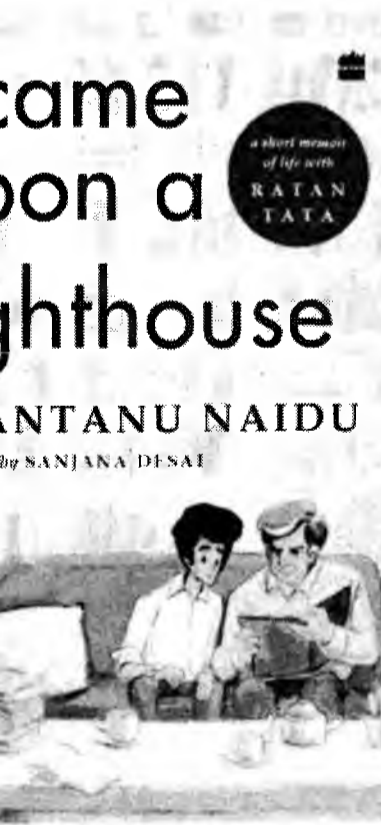
Naidu's mind was very clear before he started the book.

"I told him that when I write a book, I would write about another side of him and not just historic

events or business milestones. I would write about us and our adventures together, and how I saw him, colours and shades of him unknown to the world. Life beyond the great steel wall of 'industry doyen'.

"He agreed. There cannot be one book that captures everything... So you do your thing, give your perspective," Naidu said.

To this end, Naidu said, the thought behind the book "has always been that of sharing the privilege of knowing Mr Tata personally with the larger community of his many admirers who only know him through news reports. There are shades of him other than that of a humble businessman which I have tried my best to capture in this light-hearted narrative.



I also wanted to show how genuine and wholesome intergenerational friendships can be."

To address a growing social issue — and to acknowledge how this story began — all author proceeds from the book will be donated to Sparsh Trust, an animal welfare organization, to be utilised for animals in distress and need — be it birds, cattle, or stray dogs and cats."

Maharshi Kishor Dave, a founder trustee of Sparsh Trust, Mumbai, said: "We at Sparsh feel humbled to receive this donation. Each rupee we receive will be used to help injured, sick or old animals and birds, which we are sure will make the sale of every copy that much more meaningful and blessed." (*IANS*)

Artsy trends

By Siddhi Jain

As tumultuous 2020 was for the art industry, forcing galleries and museums to close and driving collectors to digital platforms, a significant part of both viewing art and buying it has changed. Experts from the world of art predict that the virtual is here to stay and 2021 will continue to present opportunities for all stakeholders to engage as a community.

According to Sanjoy K Roy, Managing Director, Teamwork Arts, Covid-19 has certainly put a spotlight on virtual arts and the entertainment sector. He said: "Intimate and focussed" could well be the new mantra to replace 'bigger and brighter'. Solo performances could bring talent and excellence back to the fore. Innovation in social and cultural celebrations and incorporation of the arts to provide a sense of place, identity and tradition, are the need of today and tomorrow. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and virtual reality could help traverse the world instead of the flatbed or the cramped seat. Hosting a virtual performance requires the same care and attention as a live event."

He added: "The sad reality is that without policy intervention and strong support as we have seen across Europe and other parts, the entertainment and arts sector will find it difficult to survive the twin onslaught of the pandemic and the economic downturn. What is rarely understood is that the Creative Economy is a necessity and not a luxury and will lead to job and wealth creation. Without the arts, you will have neither innovation nor creativity!"

Roshini Vadehra, Director, Vadehra Art Gallery told *IANSLife*: "2021 will have the Indian art world slowly come back to the physical space. Galleries like ours are now holding physical exhibitions at our gallery spaces. The digital initiatives in 2020 have drawn in a new crop of collectors with several young people starting to build collections. The audience that the digital space has helped build will continue to expand with 2021 also having a hybrid model of virtual and physical for exhibitions, art fairs and auctions."

Somak Mitra, Director of Kolkata-based Gallery Art Exposure added: "Due to the pandemic, we have made a major shift in boosting our social media presence which resulted into reaching out to a lot of young collectors across the world. We see this trend getting boosted further in 2021 where social media will play a big role in boosting our overall sales. We also see cutting edge contemporary art hitting it big in 2021."

"We can give in to the fact that people are spending more time at home and also indulging in various online auctions, art appreciation courses, visiting virtual shows. This they were probably not doing earlier because of travel time which they are now gaining by going online. In fact, art saw different openings in online auctions and online buying through galleries too. International buying was much easier and boundaries became more fluid. The galleries which were opening only within states saw the interested buyers not only nationally but internationally. The works with lower prices were easily accessible and so were the works of more established artists and also masters. The markets seemed to be booming in many areas. I do see this not as a trend but a way of life," Delhi-based Seema Kohli told *IANSLife*.

Art curator and critic Priyanka Banerjee, believes artists were compelled to take recourse to the virtual media during this time, and anticipates a greater demand for tranquil, green spaces in the visual arts, as most of the people have led a quarantined existence. "I see a greater appreciation for fine arts. Artworks, sculptures, photographs on nature will be in demand and will soothe the senses. Nature imageries are synonymous with tranquility, rejuvenation, renewal and growth- all of which will be the focal points of artworks in the coming year."

Artist Sangeeta Gupta said, "I have been contemplating on this issue for the last nine months. Art needs interface, visual conversation. But it is not possible in the present scenario therefore, the digital platform becomes the only recourse for display and sale of art. The new generation prefers to buy everything online, art will be no exception." (*IANSLife*)

VOCABULARY - IN COVID AND OTHER TIMES

It's a year since we have learnt to live with the term COVID-19 popping up in every conversation among friends, in tv shows featuring experts, reminding us of the terrible toll it has taken on our known world. It seems almost surreal to go back to the pre-January, 2020 time, as some corner or the other in the world still remains locked-down, masks, once used by bandits, has become the new accessory, and the sanitizer spray in hand is as common as a ladies vanity bag.

Like so many new situations springing up from this pandemic with which we have had to cope, even our vocabulary has changed somewhat. Zoom is no more associated with zoom lenses in photography but a platform everybody seems to use to meet - in the office, in family get-togethers, what have you.

New words have also entered the lexicon like the quaint 'Quarantinis', apparently a mix of two words - quarantine and cocktail - concocted with whatever ingredients are available at home. In India, the land of big fat weddings, people have learnt to embrace 'micro-weddings' thanks to the enforced number of invitees. With no option to travel to coveted destinations, armchair travellers have settled for 'staycations', or even 'workations'.

Perhaps it is no surprise this devastating year has thrown up new words. After all, language tends to evolve all the time and with time it folds into itself in new words. The best example is English which has gained many new words through the ages, getting faster especially when it colonised a vast terrain of the globe containing diverse cultures. India has enriched the language from that period with words like godown, compound, tamasha, punch, dacoit, Jodhpur, curry, pucca, etc.

New words constantly make it into dictionaries if used widely, like 'mocktail' which features in the drinks menu of any respectable Indian restaurant today but was un-

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed many new challenges to the world but it has also spawned a new set of words that have become a part of our everyday lingo. But then new words have always made their way into the contemporary language enriching it in the process, says Ranjita Biswas



heard of sometime ago, and now there's even a 'hangry' (angry when you are hungry).

Characteristically the trend continues even in modern times as newer versions of Collins or Oxford dictionaries regularly show up.

The interesting thing is that as the language penetrates different cultures through English medium schools, films and other platforms, it metaphors into new words that become chalti bhasha or street language.

One of the best ways to keep a tab on the pulse of the language in its various avatars is to listen to the young set, call them GenX, Y or Z - whatever, who 'freak out' at the slightest opportunity. Shortening the English words is one way to do that. In Kolkata 'enthu' replacing enthusiasm is now an old hat as also 'sentu' for sentimental. 'Funda' for fundamental, 'intro' or 'appo' for appointment are freely used. But what about 'snax'? No relation to the salt-

ed biscuit brand of the same name but bath! Where's the connection? Well, snan in Bengali means bath, so....

'Tux' has no relation with the tuxedo who wears it in our country anyway - but a baldie which must have originated with the Hindi word, taklu. Other favourites are 'ultra' or 'mega' to signify extra-big/extra-something, 'sad' for anything you don't like, 'timepass' for whiling away the hours. 'Heavy' is a favourite street language for Bengalis to denote 'very good' which can be used for anything, from a beautiful sari to a delicious curry.

In the capital Delhi abbreviations that were popular sometime ago were ATM (aunty turned mod) and BTM (behenji turned mod). Wonder if they are still in vogue considering their slightly sexist/condescending tone.

And, we are not the only ones to end a sentence with a question mark 'no'? The language purists in Sin-

gapore have long been trying to persuade people to leave out 'lah' at the end, a staple of 'Singlish' a local patois of English and Chinese.

Social networking and twittering have spawned their own abbreviations. OMG, LOL, TTYL (talk to you later) 'mwah' (noisy kissing), wags (girlfriend/wife of, usually sportsman), BFF (best friends forever) are by now senior citizens in this category. Also commonly used are terms like ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing), LMAO (laughing my ass off), even GOAT (greatest of all time). But have you heard of IMHO (in my humble opinion), TMI (too much information) with which many bombarded from all directions will empathise.

All this only proves that words talk volumes about contemporary times. What is new today will be old tomorrow, like aging, but new blood invigorates it to let it reinvent itself again and again.

(Trans World Features)

Performing arts in India in 2021

By Siddhi Jain

The trials and tribulations of 2020 propelled many to seek refuge in the comfort of a favourite song, the upbeat rhythm that came from a dance sequence, or the much-needed break that came to our screens in the form of digital theatre. While the past year saw increased, especially online, activity for these performing arts, what does 2021 have in store?

DANCE

Priya Venkataraman, Bharatanatyam Dancer and choreographer, says, "2020 saw a surge in online performances and classes. This allowed me as a dancer to connect to students worldwide. I see this trend continuing through to the majority of next year while the established and senior artists will return to the stage with limited audiences. Online platforms & festivals are here to stay as they offer much needed visibility without the need for sponsors."

Indian-Australian choreographer and dance mentor Ashley Lobo says: "Going forward into 2021, I see a trend of a blend of digital and offline engagement in performing arts. I see collaborations and dance education using the digital medium much more. Choreographers experimenting with film and multimedia will expand and that should make for some interesting and engaging viewing. Live performance will definitely be back because as human beings the human interaction can never be replaced. As far as art goes I am hopeful that the digital medium will expand the awareness and the younger generation will find interest in it considering it is coming to them in a medium that they have strong ties to."

THEATRE

Shailja Kejriwal, Chief Creative Officer, Special Projects at Zee Entertainment Enterprises Ltd said that when they first started digitising plays, it was not with the possibility of a pandemic in mind but over the last few months, the format has developed a new relevance. "In the coming year, digitising of storytell-

ing will become more expansive, diverse and all-encompassing. With people now searching for a variety of content to watch combined with existing theatre lovers who still wish for access to plays, digital theatre is a medium which will be further explored in 2021."

"From the perspective of theatre, digitisation will play a large role. It will help theater broaden and deepen its reach. New products will get developed which will leverage the unique strengths of theater such as the live broadcast of performances. Theater in its traditional form will continue to serve niche audience that relish the old world charm. However, the theater performances will be enhanced with the use of new technology," Hemant Bharat Ram, Executive Vice President, Shri Ram Centre for Performing Arts (SRCPA) told IANSLife.

MUSIC

"The Internet has been reshaping the music landscape, which has been further accelerated by the recent pandemic. Technology, Innovation, and Collaboration will lead the way in the coming years. New platforms and mediums will gain prominence, reinventing the ways audiences connect with music creators. The pandemic has forced artists & creators across the globe to postpone their live on-ground concerts indefinitely. As an alternate, many turned to virtual performances. While virtual shows propose new possibilities for the music industry, technology will play a critical role in making it a success," asserted Rakesh Nigam, CEO, IPRS.

He concluded, "The experience created online will define the popularity and value-for-money, and whether it can attract/hold on to its audience in the long run. The permission and licenses also have to be looked into to create a win-win situation for all the stakeholders. At IPRS, we are mindful of the changing times and have taken measures to ensure that the authors, composers and publishers of music reap all benefits possible of their hard work and creative ability." (IANSLife)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambhani

Sunday, January 3, 2021

Moon trine Mars on your solar return chart and it will give wonderful results for the whole year ahead. You will have the zest and zeal required to complete your tasks. Your boss and officials will be happy with your work. You could be promoted in your job. You will also win over everyone's heart with your hard work and behavior. Even your colleagues will help you in your work. But you need to remain away from controversies. Your enemies and opponents might overwhelm you, and even some of your works will be criticized. But it will not affect your morale and you will keep on doing good work with all sincerity. Your business will also flourish. Money inflow will be continuous. Your family members will share amazing bonding with you. You will get appreciation for your deeds. Those who are single will get married. Auspicious functions will keep taking place.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

There would be a lot of traveling, communications and conversation to keep you busy. Arguments with a lover may be blown out of proportion far too easily. Both you and your lover should avoid harping on the words used and try to get to the meaning behind the words instead. Professionally it might seem like stagnation, but it's actually a period of review and rest. Speculation and gambling are not advised right now. It would be wise to be especially clear when it comes to communicating with romantic partners, and children; or take this time to re-examine issues rather than communicating prematurely.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

Your work status will change for the better. There could be a promotion or new job opportunity that enables you to come into the limelight in a positive way. Authority figures, elders, parents in your life tend to support and respect you. They are more willing to help you move ahead on your road to success. An event may occur that expands your career or professional interests, and you derive more pleasure from these activities. More freedom is likely to be experienced in dealing with the assignment at hand. You need to keep your eyes open for opportunities.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

You would admire and adapt new styles, unconventional ideas, and unfamiliar situations. It is a good time to expand your circle of influence. You take an interest in organizing your working environment - and this is an excellent time to do so. You are especially objective and intelligent when it comes to getting a handle on your daily affairs and all of the little things that contribute to a feeling of efficiency and competency. Laying down a strategy would keep you on track. Some travel is imminent and will be beneficial.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

This can be a time of achievement, career advancement, and success in business. Work-related travel or the reaching of a wider audience is possible during this period. This is a time when you renew your energy and consider your priorities. Rethinking the suitability of your romantic relationships is possible now, but you should avoid jumping to any premature decisions. There may be the need to revisit old issues with your children or lover else there could be some communication problems with them.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

Communication becomes especially important to you. Smoothing out your close personal relationships is what makes you happy. You are adaptable when it comes to your affections - very willing to compromise, negotiate, and make peace. A new set-up in existing jobs or a new job altogether may be formed in the coming months. There will be a sense of renewal and reinvigoration with regard to your daily activities, health and attention to practical matters. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of your health.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

You may be involved in lectures, debates and discussions. You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or new subjects. You are quite preoccupied with feelings of security and your inner experiences. This is a time when you find your roots and seek

a Your professional skills, wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain an exciting quality. Tackle sensitive subjects and difficult people and get your point across. You can trust your intuition about people and situations when called upon to mediate in conflicts and collaborations. Surprises surrounding the compassionate care and attention you give others, as well as the work and service you render, may be in store.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

It's easier for you to approach sensitive, intimate, and personal matters with rationality and logic in this period. As such, this is a great time to open up conversations about topics that normally might cause waves, such as those revolving around the sharing of power, intimacy, and finances. You know how to relate to others and you do so with warmth and affection. You will seek out the company of close friends who stimulate your thoughts and ideas. You may attract a younger person into your life.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

Essentially, you are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or simply new subjects during this period. Negative potentials include being excessively opinionated or getting easily fired up over differences in points of view, or legal fights. You may be drawn into some form of service that will bring deep personal satisfaction. You seek perfection and distinction in your work and this quality brings you a more responsible position.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

People see you as a responsible, sincere, loving and lovable person, and as someone who is aware of their needs and feelings, which can benefit you at this time. Others are willing to help and cooperate with you in working towards your goals and ambitions. It would be better to go for long term investments and speculations for financial gains. It would be wiser to face turbulent matters and issues in professional ventures rather than seeing them under the carpet. Don't take the one you love for granted but show your love and appreciation.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

A new work opportunity can change the way you work and relate with people professionally. You are bold and adventurous and you cannot tolerate delays that could hold up your work. You succeed by adopting a new approach and exhibiting a willingness to take risks. You would achieve a lot in business and professional aspects by combining creativity and practicality. Your maturity and objectivity places you in the role of the dependable and someone your family and friends can turn to for advice and guidance. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and they would be profitable. This is a good time to belong with a friend or a group who shares your own ideas and thoughts. You would attach yourself to more spiritual friends. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities come your way. This is an excellent period for starting new regimens to better your health and well being, such as a structured exercise program and more structured and productive use of your time.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

This is an excellent time in which you do some financial planning and strategizing. A financial boost is possible, or you may gain financially through your business partner. Research uncovers new material that allows you to develop a better overall picture of the period's events. This is a phase when you have an increased awareness of the need for someone significant to rely on. You would find a balance between autonomy and dependence in personal relationships. You can expect superiors to support you and stand up for you in tough situations at work.

Events and Celebration Management as Career

By Ranjan K Baruah

We have experienced a year with lots of challenges due to the pandemic. The best part is we have entered another year which shall bring lots of challenges and opportunities. Most of us have enjoyed the New Year celebration and now reading this article as we have time to read. Let me join you in wishing a great year ahead. I would like to mention an option which is booming and increasing in our region. This is related to activities or celebration and together we can call it as events. Well, event management is another new vista in career and we can try and plan a career related to events.

Event management is the application of project management to the creation and development of large-scale events such as festivals, conferences, ceremonies, formal parties, concerts or conventions. It involves studying the brand, identifying the target audience, devising the event concept, and coordinating the technical aspects before actually launching the event.

The process of planning and coordinating the event is usually referred to as event planning and which can include budgeting, scheduling, site selection, acquiring necessary permits, coordinating transportation and parking, arranging for speakers or entertainers, arranging

decor, event security, catering, coordinating with third party vendors, and emergency plans.

The events industry now includes events of all sizes from the Olympics down to business breakfast meetings. Many industries, charitable organisations, and interest groups hold events in order to market themselves, build business relationships, raise money, or celebrate achievement. Increase in trade and commerce and other activities also create many other things. It is always helpful for the entrepreneurs and people who are creative and serious about work.

Event management, the most profound form of advertising and marketing, is a glamorous and thrilling profession. It provides an opportunity for unleashing one's creative potential to a very high degree.

One does not need much formal qualification to be part of these professions. Some of the qualities which are important are skills like good communication skills, self-confidence and must be able to manage people and also work in a team, etc. Having good knowledge over language including writing is another advantage. Leadership skills, work under pressure is also needed.

Most important in this regard is the value of time, it means service must be provided on time. People who are lazy have no place in this profession, one needs to be fast and

connected with technology like the internet. Students of Mass Communication or Public relations can also take up this profession.

With the event management industry poised to grow by leaps and bounds, trained candidates have excellent job opportunities. The success of an event manager or event management team depends upon its capacity to procreate themes that have never been thought of before.

Some of the courses related to event management are: Certificate Course in Event Management, Diploma in Event Management, Post Graduate Diploma in Event Management, Post Graduate Diploma in Event Management and Public Relations, etc. There are some institutes that offer this kind of courses. People can start event management even without doing any of these courses.

Event Management is yet to take momentum in the region but in the last few years it has increased. In the near future there will be more demand for people who are associated with event management and youths from the state can take up event management as their career options. Last but not least I wish a great year ahead for all our esteemed readers.

(The author is a career mentor and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkranjani@gmail.com for any career related queries)



Representational image

"If you do not tell the truth about yourself you cannot tell it about other people."

—Virginia Woolf

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RSS and religion

BOTH RSS and its chief Mohan Bhagwat have added importance in recent times. They have done a political engineering which proved to be successful and put the Grand Old Party, the Congress, on the defensive after long years of the tricolour rule mostly under successive generations of the Nehru dynasty. His comments at the launch of a book on Mahatma Gandhi were, thus, more noteworthy. Among his observations was that "a Hindu is an automatic patriot and a Hindu will never be anti-India." A problem with the RSS has perhaps been its over-emphasis on religion, and this often at the cost of the other major aspects of public life. Most RSS leaders, when they set out, head straight to the subject of religion. This perhaps is the nationalist organisation's flaw as well. India is overwhelmingly Hindu and there is no serious threat to it from any of the minority communities other than in relation to the Kashmir-related militant activities, which too targeted government entities rather than non-Muslims as such. Bombs exploded by terrorists and militants in cities or elsewhere also killed hapless people irrespective of their religions. Such cases have come down across India in recent years and thankfully also due to support from Muslim communities themselves in alerting cops on dangerous movements of suspected militants.

On the other hand, fact is also that a kind of militancy is evident in the Hindu ranks too. The Modi government seems exerting control on such elements too in order to keep up the law and order situation. But, the Ahmedabad riots are still in everyone's minds, though it was a follow-up to the Godhra train burning incident. Overall, the point to note is that there are trouble-makers in every society. There was a time, recently, when the RSS chief stated that all people born and living in India are "Hindus" irrespective of whether or not they are part of the religion. This time too, he has stated that "unity in diversity is our sentiment and not just a matter of policy." This, he said, is the fundamental of Indian thought. "Once this is accepted and appreciated, the issue is settled. Former prime minister, late PV Narasimha Rao, stated when he first took over as prime minister, that "the best way to exist in India is to co-exist." India is a mosaic of cultures, religions, races, languages, castes, creeds, and therein lies its beauty. It must be preserved at all costs. The collective force of all these, acting in positive ways, can take the nation to great heights.

At year's-end, the resilience of the human spirit is predominant

2020: An elegy

By TP Sreenivasan

When Mughal emperor Aurangzeb banned music and destroyed musical instruments, some people demonstrated before him crying aloud with great grief as if they were escorting to the grave the body of some distinguished person. Asked what it was about, they said, "Your Majesty, we are burying music." "Bury it so deep under the earth that no sound or echo of it may rise again." The epitaph on the tombstone of 2020 should be 'A Year Buried Deep', but the year, like music, has immortalised itself with its sheer devastation of the earth and threatening mankind with extinction. It exceeded Hiroshima and Nagasaki and multiples of 9/11 in sheer destructive force. A virtual Third World War is still raging on all continents. None has escaped its wrath, none has remained unchanged. There is some consolation that the next year cannot be worse, even though the repair and reconstruction will take years.

Not that humanity was not warned. The warning signals were there when the snow melted in the Arctic and freezing water flowed down the Himalayas, whisking away homes, trees and mountains, followed by droughts in the Indo-Gangetic plains, rivers overflowed one day and dried up the next. Forests burnt themselves out in rich countries. Waves of pandemics swept through several countries, but mankind prided itself in the strength of its muscle and the brilliance of its brain to withstand the onslaught of calamities. Now we know that these are not "natural" disasters; these are suicidal acts of insolence.

2020 appears to be the final warning to humanity and if we fail, the fury of the earth will upstage the comfort level of mankind and make it difficult for its inhabitants. The biggest scare at this moment is the possibility of the present situation continuing into the new year and beyond. The lifestyle, particularly of the developed countries, must change to a sustainable one so that the resources are conserved for the future generations. Global warming has already been recognised as an existential threat to mankind, though the steps taken so far have made no difference to our race towards perdition. The much publicised Paris Agreement, which depends on voluntary reduction of

greenhouse gases to prevent global warming, has so far failed to make an impact.

The pandemic may have been a result of global warming, the reasons and remedy for which are established, but the science of the coronavirus is still shrouded in mystery and its prevention and treatment are still by trial and error. No one has any idea when it will end and what consequences it will leave behind. But the expectation is that Covid-19 might disappear with 2020 and we can look forward to some respite in the new year, though there is no rational justification for it. The deaths, suffering and despair it has caused are immeasurable and hope alone sustains the human race.

Predictions began to be made about a post Covid-19 world right from the beginning of the pandemic, but none has proved right, neither those who predicted the end of the world nor those who thought it was just a flu that would go away. The tantalising emergence of vaccines by the dozens have raised many questions, not only on health, but also equity, human rights and discrimination. Administering vaccines to the whole world cannot but last a long time. The impact on personal lifestyles has been great and every profession has changed beyond recognition.

Technology has come to the rescue because communications did not collapse, despite its wide and intensive use ranging from ordering provisions to pontificating on the future of the world. Webinars had existed for years, but suddenly it became the norm and the only escape from intellectual starvation and the feeling of being left out. International conference venues became as lonely as graveyards, but diplomacy went on without its frills of international travel and face-to-face interaction. The fear of technology domination that Yuval Noah Harari predicted in Davos became the saving grace for mankind. "Technology might also disrupt human society and the very meaning of human life in numerous ways, ranging from the creation of a global useless class to the rise of data colonialism and of digital dictatorships," he had said.

For nations, as for people, survival became the

measure of success. It looked as though another era of survival of the fittest had begun. The pandemic did not follow a recognisable pattern in choosing its victims by age, race or financial capacity. Ridiculous theories, like countries with women heads of state are immune to the disease and those with dictatorial leaders are susceptible, began to spread. President Donald Trump sacrificed thousands of his countrymen by challenging the most basic scientific method of prevention for which his defeat was a minor punishment.

Statistics of deaths by Covid-19 are sheer numbers till a name suddenly pops up of someone close to us. The extreme agony gives way to a sense of resignation and a prayer that we and our dear ones should be spared. Loneliness in death and departure without a hug and a kiss has been the most painful parts of Covid-19 deaths. Intimations of mortality for people above 65 is a new phenomenon created by the pandemic. But hope still persists.

It is too early to predict the geopolitical consequences of the pandemic. The impact of the French Revolution is too early to tell, said Mao Zedong. But whether China created the pandemic or not, it is going to be the greatest beneficiary of it. China's race to the top has been accentuated by managing the pandemic and by flexing the muscles from the Himalayas to the South China Sea. By the time President Joe Biden settles down to fix his China strategy, Xi Jinping will have made much progress in its bid to overtake the US. The stalemate on the Line of Actual Control is a great embarrassment to India, but some strategists say that the stalemate is a defeat for China. The emergence of Quad as a roadblock to China has been stopped on its track by the transition in the US and India's reluctance to provoke China on that account.

India is second only to the US in terms of deaths and devastation by Covid. But considering the size of the country and its population, India has done well in combatting Covid. By encouraging international cooperation in the fight against the pandemic and by becoming a pharmacy to the

world owing to the production and export of generic medicines, India has gained some advantages, but the economic collapse has set the clock of development back by several years.

As we approach the end of 2020, it is the resilience of the human spirit that is most predominant. As it happened after the 9/11 bombing, people resurrected from the tragedy with amazing courage and innovation. The way humanity got adjusted to the new norms is a miracle. People have begun to identify the blessings of the pandemic, leaving the dead and the dispirited behind. From online education to new business models, from new diets to innovative entertainment, the revolutionary changes have begun to be accepted. The aspiration is not to return to 2019, but to create a new 2021 and beyond.

At the individual level, all of us have been denied freedom to travel, meet people and to share the joys of life. Home food, exercise and medicines in time may have even improved the health condition of many. More literature, painting and other forms of art may have been created because of added leisure to life. Family members may have discovered each other, as though they were living on a deserted island with just one coconut tree. Creeping depression may not be visible, but that explains suicides, crimes and aggravation of certain diseases. But mankind is a stubborn species, with the power to cope with adversities. Talents, ambition, love and other emotions cannot be locked down. It appears as though we have been washing hands, sanitising and keeping social distance all our lives. People are willing to travel in planes that look like ICUs and to be in quarantine for days together.

Our fond hopes of a new dawn in 2021 may well be illusory, but elegies end with hope:

Now Lycidas the Shepherds weep no more; Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore, In thy large recompense, and shalt be good. To all that wander in that perilous flood... At last he rose, and twitched his Mantle blue: Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and pastures new (John Milton: Lycidas)

About the author: TP Sreenivasan is a former diplomat

Cautious optimism in the New Year

By Ajit Ranade

The welcome to the new year was wishfully cheerful, riding more on hope than on evidence. The economic data that is coming out is still mixed, yet hopeful. But to have survived the year 2020 is itself a cause for celebration. Disease, death, economic destruction, and yet resilience, fortitude and determination is how most people experienced the last year. Most of the country for much of 2020, was in lockdown mode, which was progressively diluted. The lockdown is still operative in many States. It has affected jobs, income, livelihoods especially in the informal sector. The plight of the urban migrant workers in the country is now well known, and was even mentioned by the Prime Minister in his radio address. The rural economy turned out to be their saviour. The adverse economic impact on small and medium businesses has been severe. The exact detailed economic picture of India's vast informal sector becomes clear only with a lag.

The virus is still with us, although vaccinations have started. Just four countries account for half of all the Covid cases worldwide. These are United States, India, Brazil and Russia. India's population is 17 percent of the world, and the country now has 13 percent of all global cases. Despite this sobering fact, it is also true that India managed to "flatten the curve" much better than the other three countries. All three till recently were registering ever increasing daily numbers of the infected and also fatalities. India's declining daily count for the last couple of months is remarkable, given the much lower state of health infrastructure relative to our GDP. Perhaps the management of the pandemic has improved considerably, as also patient recovery rates. There may be an element of inbuilt immunity that we don't know. As of this writing the government has given an emergency approval to two vaccines which are yet to finish the final phase of their clinical trials. The pace at which leading scientists of the world managed to develop a vaccine is nothing short of spectacular. It is also testimony to the benefit of global collaboration in science and of openness in the digital age.

The economic revival which is now visible, is also remarkable, because it has been achieved with much less fiscal stimulus as compared to other countries. The comeback signs are evident in corporate profitability, sporadic cases of revival in the real estate sector, rising collections in GST, much higher sowing area for the rabi crop, and an increase in employment numbers. This year India will end up producing a record 301 million tonnes of food grains, and next year too the outlook for agricultural growth is for 3.5 percent. The Union Budget due in less than four weeks promises a strong dose of fiscal stimulus through infrastructure, and of course a beefing up of health and education, which are part of the soft infrastructure. The stock market continues its gravity defying rise, as if it is completely oblivious to the underlying economy. We know that the stock market is forward looking and not myopic, but its vision seems to be far out into the future! The government must find a way to tap into the wealth of the stock market to fund its

stimulus requirement. The buoyant markets are also an opportune time to divest government holdings in the public sector enterprises already identified by Niti Aayog. Another way is to pledge the PSU shares, currently valued at more than 15 lakh crore rupees, to the Reserve Bank of India in a sweetheart bilateral "loan against shares" deal, priced at a low interest rate of just above the repo rate. These shares can be pledged for a period of five years and then swapped back.

The optimism about the new year, should not however distract us from some difficult challenges that will need urgent attention. Firstly, there is the crisis around the new farm laws. The agitation led by farmers is more than a month old, and their demand for repeal seems to be increasingly non-negotiable. Their apprehensions are very real, whether the concerns are about minimum support prices for wheat and rice, or legal protection available when contracting with large corporates, or protection from downward price spikes. The government must find a face-saving way to end the agitation since it is now not just affecting the farm sector in the North, but also has disrupted the flow of coal, fertiliser and other railway freight. This will surely affect industrial production and sentiment in the Northern States. An early resolution is critical. Why not explore the possibility of keeping the laws in abeyance, refer them to a parliamentary standing committee, and in the meantime let individual States, aligned with the ruling party, go ahead and implement them, if politically feasible?

The second big challenge is in banking. The K.V.Kamath committee had identified 26 sectors where loans will have to be restructured, without the respective borrowers being pushed into bankruptcy. The total identified loans under stress were about 48 lakh crores. But as the period of moratorium ends, only a tiny fraction of these borrowers have come forward to take the offer of restructuring. Do we interpret that to mean that most of the stressed borrowers have become profitable? Or are there some deeper yet to be discovered problems? The last thing we need is another bank failure. In fact, in the Union Budget the finance minister will have to make large allocations to recapitalise public sector banks, especially after the devastating impact of the pandemic. For India to grow at 8 or 9 percent, bank credit must grow at 18 to 20 percent at the very least, and that calls for a substantial risk capital injection. Where is this going to come from?

Beyond the anti-farm law agitation and imminent banking challenges, there is also the need to give a big boost to exports. The new foreign trade policy will be unveiled shortly after the Union Budget. We have lost the export momentum of the past in the last five years with a current situation of nearly zero growth.

There is no doubt that 2021 will be much better than last year, and we should use it as a bridge to get back to high, sustainable, inclusive and greener growth.

(Dr. Ajit Ranade is an economist and Senior Fellow, Takshashila Institution) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

TO THE EDITOR

Our fascination with the West

Editor, The two recent articles, 'The real clouds of Meghalaya' and "When inner clouds blind the heart". By Deepa Majumdar (ST Dec 25 & 29, 2020) speak what very few can think of and fewer still have the courage to write about. How could we see faults in us "now" when we have been brought up to celebrate and take delight in everything from the West? We have not just appreciated their knowledge of science and technology which are undoubtedly indispensable, but we have also picked up those which are prejudicial to our own culture as Prof Majumdar discussed in her articles. I do not want to go deeper into this except for a few examples in the "national" context.

Don't we passionately want to mimic Elvis's numbers and rock songs by Tina Turner and John Lennon and shake ourselves to their beats? Not just that: we have long been adapting our own folk songs to their disco rhythms. By hook or crook we have to sound a little more like the West, or else we feel outdated. This fever has not only gripped Meghalaya or the Northeast. The entire country's urbane population, nay, now even the

rural folks, try their level best to copy the West. The digital world has only accelerated the pace. Some of our youths have begun to appreciate pizza/cake than roti/pitha/puthara... The fine table manners of the west have literally brought revolution leading to total change in our kitchen settings. Have we not ditched our decent apparel in favour of western styles that match our painstakingly acquired western accent? Prof. Majumdar has aptly cited an example for us to ponder over how one strand of blonde hair caused so much euphoria in the classroom even in the late 60s. The author writes - "My awestruck colonized classmates passed around her single strand of gold hair as if it were gold itself." It is no exaggeration at all!

Yes, everything is fine if we do not ridicule our own heritage or hate our own fellow brothers and sisters at the cost of our blind infatuation. We often tend to look down upon our immediate relatives/neighbors who still follow the customs, traditions and religious beliefs that our forefathers were following since time immemorial. Many parents find it difficult to get their daughters married if they are not converted. We have almost begun to measure our day-to-day mannerism, styles, gestures, customs, including religion, by the yardstick of our colonial masters. We have

completely forgotten how they ill-treated us, denigrated the Indian culture and even distorted many of our historical facts. This is absurdly bizarre. If I am not mistaken, we often coin special vernacular terms to describe our fellow brethren who are slow to adopt the western culture.

In the rat race of becoming English gentlemen we have virtually buried many of our cultural practices, while some we have set aside only as ceremonial affairs. Usually, some of us do not even want to be reminded of our past practices. What one finds very unsettling is that, without ever making any unbiased efforts to analyze them, we habitually wink at those rich values and knowledge. When any elderly person tries to bring certain past cultural practices to our minds, he might run the risk of being called names. This I am saying from my own personal experiences.

Here is another shocker in India. Our fascination for the West is not restricted to the white skin. Even the cruel invaders from the Middle East have been glorified in many respects. Have we not been taught to call Akbar the Great and Babar the Great along with Alexander the Great? Some even call Aurangzeb, the Great! Didn't he imprison his own father Shah Jahan and execute innumerable people from a specific religion that did not want to convert to his

religion? How come the despotic invaders can be greats, I always wonder in amazement. How on earth do we adore those whose hands are stained with the blood of humanity? How could we call them valiant who exploited "countless" women/tender girls for their sensual fulfillment and destroyed so many sacred spiritual institutions? I find something seriously amiss in the country for quite some time!

Yes, even I would have been swimming with the same current with the same belief-system had it not been for a few books that I was inspired by my father to read. They alone had turned my head from the West to the East. In contrast the writers of those books were acclaimed "thinkers from the west". I came to know from those books about the profound literary riches of ancient India. Cutting short the present discussion, the book - "The Tao of Physics" by the Modern American Physicist Fritjof Capra stirred my mind - this title has been translated into 23 languages. It instantly opened the door for me to move in the "right direction". Just in a few months my long-held prejudice against the country vanished but after much struggle. I was amazed to know then that the epoch-making modern scientist like Niels Bohr was awestruck by the depth of Indian wisdom from that physics book. So

much so, I learned that Erwin Schrodinger had proclaimed - "Some blood transfusion from the East to the West is a must to save western science from spiritual anaemia". This great Nobel Laureate who gave wheels to Quantum Mechanics by his "Wave function equation", would not have applauded India had he not found gems in the ancient literary treasure troves. He has "very profusely" quoted Eastern wisdom in his several works.

Finally, I would like to assert here by quoting from the horse's mouth. TS Eliot, probably one of the most celebrated poets and critics of the 20th Century writes in his "After Strange Gods" - "Indian Philosopher's subtleties make most of the great European philosophers look like schoolboys". If our western masters speak in this tone and tenor then I think we need to tune up the string of our minds with more circumspection. We need to "trust and follow" those values and knowledge that have been trusted by the most trusted thinkers.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gewali
Shillong

Rejoinder

Editor, Apropos the letter, 'Poor Work Culture' (Dec 24, 2020) by Pratham K Sharma and 'Rejoinder from SSPO' (Dec 25th 2020) by Susmita

Majumder, I agree with the former who has expressed displeasure at the working of the Laitumkhrh branch of the post office. I don't know about being underage, but the workers look totally experienced and thus, take a lot of time to solve minor grievances of customers. Work culture is an important part of any organization, especially when it has to provide citizen-centric service to the public at large. It seems that the workers at the Laitumkhrh PO lack intent and that is having repercussions on the customers who have to face the problems because of their shambolic and lethargic way of dealing with work. I must also mention that instead of defending the PO, the ASP should instead resort to taking action against the ones responsible for this poor image of the Laitumkhrh branch. I myself have been facing issues at this branch since the last few years and it's high time that things change for the better. Susmita Majumder also claims that people have to wait in long queues because of social distancing protocols. Well, I must clarify that there is absolutely no social distancing protocol being followed. I request the government to take this matter seriously, immediately.

Yours etc.,
Damien Phanbuh,
Shillong-3

"There is no cure for birth and death save to enjoy the interval."

- George Santayana

The Shillong Times

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Vaccine regime and transparency

PRIME Minister Modi has hailed the vaccination drive that is set to begin soon in India. The Drugs Controller General of India has formally approved two vaccines for restricted use under emergency conditions. They include Covishield by the Serum Institute of India (SII), and Covaxin by Bharat Biotech. There are other vaccines under consideration but the above two seem to have fulfilled the criteria set on how future COVID-19 vaccines will be evaluated and administered. India has been producing vaccines for a long time but none that has been developed indigenously and tested and approved by world bodies. This is why there is a certain worry about the efficacy of the vaccines and/or their side effects. Prime Minister Modi is correct in saying that "Made in India" products should not only have global demand but global acceptance as well. That's the operative part. Quality control is of the utmost importance.

It is in this regard that the call for transparency is getting shriller. Transparency means establishing the vaccine's efficacy in the Indian population before rollout. But this final process is being by-passed. This is where the West trumps because there is a clear demand for transparency vide a double-blinded phase-trial where volunteers who get the vaccine and those who don't and the rate of the disease in both are compared to test the vaccine's impact. This is the gold standard for evidence-based medicine.

Interestingly while the SII because of its agreement with AstraZeneca has furnished data from a phase-3 trial in the UK and Brazil it has been silent on the effect of the vaccine in 1600 Indian volunteers. Leading vaccine producers namely Pfizer, Moderna, including AstraZeneca have published partial results of the vaccine's results among their own people before they were given an all-clear signal by respective regulators. Bharat Biotech, which is conducting such a phase-3 trial in India, is yet to furnish similar data because of the delay in recruiting volunteers. Data from Indian companies only attest to the vaccine's safety and its ability to create immune responses. But Covid-19 has revealed several instances of therapies and interventions that worked well under ideal lab conditions but did not show the desired results outside the labs.

Companies could have been given more time to do a fool-proof trial before authorizing public vaccination regimes. In fact many are of the opinion that those at the helm of government should be the first to receive the vaccines. That said, opacity could harm India's reputation in the world of medicine. In India, people still do not vaccinate their children from the regular childhood protective doses because of superstitions and fear. The Covid vaccine might face the same fate. Hence transparency and a clear system of communication with the public where all doubts are cleared is imperative.

India's vaccine drive will be a 'work in progress'

Inherent difficulties and future uncertainties to continue

By Gyan Pathak

Since both the Indian vaccines - Covaxin and Covishield - have now been officially approved for emergency use, the focus is on its distribution and prioritization, which are still being worked out as a 'work in progress' due to many inherent difficulties in India's vaccine drive against COVID-19, monitoring the recipients of the vaccines, and also the future uncertainties relating to the pandemic itself. The known and unknown administrative issues may also crop up during the implementation of the drive requiring great alertness and quick response.

The Serum Institute of India's (SII) Covishield and Bharat Biotech's Covaxin formally cleared by the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) has enabled the country to launch the vaccination drive simultaneously in most states that were part of 'Dry Run' of January 2, to test the preparedness of our system to effectively furnish the task in hand as well as to train the medical and non-medical personnel for best implementation of the inoculation plan of the government. We must not forget that the DCGI has given only "emergency use approval" which means the companies that have developed the vaccines will have to fulfil certain additional "conditionalities".

There are therefore apprehensions among the people regarding safety of the vaccines. Union Minister of Health Dr Harsh Vardhan has said that both the vaccines ensure safety, efficacy and immunogenicity. DCGI Mr V G. Somani has declared, "We'll never approve anything if there is slightest of safety concern. The vaccines are 100 percent safe. Some side-effects like mild fever, pain, and allergy are common for every vaccine." The very statements and the conditionalities suggest the monitoring of recipients of the vaccine doses is going to be an important task for which the government should have special arrangement in place before the drive is launched.

The best part of these approvals is that these vaccines 'Made in India' will be available to the country at cheaper price than the imported vaccines. Prime Minister Narendra Modi while congratulating India for approval of these

'homemade' vaccines has also referred to his "Aatmanirbhar Bharat", but government still needs to work on its affordability to the common people. As per the reports already published, the common people may need to spend five times more than the govern-

ment of the poor, the Union Government needs to do much more than merely expressing pride on "Aatmanirbhar Bharat".

SII has offered a price of Rs 225-250, and Bharat Biotech Rs 350 for one dose of vaccine to be supplied to the government. They will



PTI Photo

ment's purchase price. Out of pocket cost for one dose of vaccine for private entities will be above 1000 rupees who in turn will charge individuals much more.

We also must note that per capita total health expenditure in the country in FY20 was still low at 1,944 rupees. Centre and states spent only 1.29 per cent of the GDP which was 2.6 trillion rupees in absolute terms. Centre's share was only 25 per cent. Our states' finances are in very bad shape due to the pandemic. How can they manage the required finances? The Government of India has no plan except that the state governments are required to take institutional and market loans. State's shares in the central revenue have dwindled to a new low due to fall in the GST revenue. It is also a fact that the Centre spends less on public health and sanitation because they are on the state list. In this scenario, if we are to vaccinate all the people in the country, even the

poorest of the poor, the Union Government needs to do much more than merely expressing pride on "Aatmanirbhar Bharat".

SII has offered a price of Rs 225-250, and Bharat Biotech Rs 350 for one dose of vaccine to be supplied to the government. They will

be sold in the market at about five times higher prices. The prices would be much higher at around Rs 1500-2000 per dose when they would reach the end users due to additional supply, storage, and handling costs. A family having five members will thus need to spend around Rs 8,000 - Rs 11,000 to get one dose of vaccine to all its members. It will be too costly to bear for the majority of families in the country.

According to an assessment around 800 million people are struggling for survival in India, and therefore they will need free vaccination as soon as possible. Crores of people also rely on private medical facilities in the country because of lack of sufficient government medical facilities and prevailing mismanagement and chaos due to heavy load of patients. Government therefore must do something to make the market price of the vaccines affordable for people.

The Government of India has made a plan of vaccina-

tion drive in likeness to the "election process" and will vaccinate only a handful at each site initially. Sessions and sites in particular districts in almost all states will be identified for vaccination on a particular date. Given the huge population in the country and limited availability of the vaccines' doses, we are constrained to vaccinate people in a phased manner. Obviously there will be politics and political parties in opposition have already started raising fingers.

Government has started registering people for vaccination by launching CoWIN, the IT platform. The platform has been developed to implement the mega vaccination drive. This platform was used during the nationwide vaccination dry runs conducted at 286 session sites across 125 districts. We have 718 districts in the country and a population of around 1.38 billion. Only 75 lakh priority receivers were registered by the day of 'Dry Run'. The low number of registration indicates the hesitation among the people regarding the vaccines. To make the vaccines acceptable among the people is thus a priority, as well as implementing the drive in all the districts of the country at the locations where people can easily reach especially when there are several transport restrictions being implemented.

India plans to vaccinate 30 crore "priority population" by July. The first three crore intended recipients would be healthcare and frontline workers who are to be vaccinated over next two months. Then the over-50 and younger population with other serious ailments would be vaccinated. Obviously, we need to speed up the process on a priority basis.

Mobilisation of vaccines to cold chain hubs, storage, and then to the vaccination centres are also going to be tough tasks. Union and the state governments are yet to create such facilities in required numbers and other related logistics. Governments are yet to place 'supply orders' for vaccines suggesting that our system is not yet ready to receive supply of the same. Needless to say, we need to speed up the vaccine administration as a 'work in progress', since there will be no 'final plan' in a highly 'fluid situation' with even new threats. (IPA Service)

when it comes to encashing, Mumbai is at the fifth spot with 2.34% share in total bonds encashed by the donee. SBI in the 14th phase of the sale was authorised to issue and encash electoral bonds through its 29 authorised branches from 19th October to 28 October 2020. Redemption or encashment of electoral bonds at SBI branches took place till November 11, 2020.

Information obtained by Commodore Batra shows that during the 14 phases of sale of electoral bonds, SBI has earned Rs 3.66 crore as commission, excluding taxes. During the 14th phase, SBI sold 321 electoral bonds worth Rs 282.29 crore, of which all except one bond of Rs 1,000, were encashed.

Until the latest window period October 2020, a total of 1,773 electoral bonds of various denominations were sold. A major portion of them is the highest value denomination of Rs 1 crore (5,981 bonds) followed by the next highest denomination of Rs 10 lakh (4,943 bonds). A total of 1,731 bonds of Rs 1 lakh denomination were sold in these 14 cycles. Meanwhile, the purchases made for the lower denominations of Rs 1,000 and Rs 10,000 are only 48 and 70 electoral bonds, respectively.

The analysis by Commodore Batra shows that electoral bonds with the highest denomination value of Rs 1 crore are the most preferred by the donors and constitute 92.12% in the to-

BJP was the biggest beneficiary of this facility among political parties SBI sold electoral bonds sans transparency

By Yogesh Sapkale

The anonymity provided to the donors by electoral bonds (EBs) is making it the preferred choice for big donors, including corporates. Over the past three years, State Bank of India (SBI), the official channel for selling these instruments, has sold EBs worth Rs 6,492.68 crore in 14 phases, shows an analysis by Commodore Lokesh Batra (retd).

Commodore Batra says, "During 2018 to 2020, SBI sold 12,773 electoral bonds, of which 12,632 bonds worth Rs 6,472.43 crore were encashed. Bonds worth Rs 20.25 crore that remain uncashed were transferred to the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF)."

The analysis carried out by Commodore Batra is based on replies he had received under the Right to Information (RTI) Act from several public authorities, including SBI.

It shows Mumbai, with 31.16% share, remains at the top where electoral bonds were sold. Mumbai is followed by Kolkata at 22.98% and New Delhi at 14.67% share.

However, when it comes to encashing the electoral bonds, Delhi leads the pack. Over the past three years, 77.31% of electoral bonds sold, were encashed in the national capital, followed by Hyderabad at 9.31% and Bhubaneswar at 4.84%. Despite contributing most in the electoral bond sale,

the issue of political funding through electoral bonds by anonymous donors. An analysis by ADR shows that Lok Sabha 2019 elections saw the highest ever anonymous funding through electoral bonds. Between FY17-18 and FY18-19, political parties received a total of Rs 2,760.20 crore from electoral bonds as donation, ADR says. In its plea filed in October last year before the Supreme Court, ADR had called sale of electoral bonds just before election as "corruption on a huge scale".

On January 2, 2018, the ministry of finance had notified the EB scheme. As per the scheme, an electoral bond is a bond issued in the nature of a promissory note. It may be purchased by a person who is a citizen of India or entities incorporated or established in India. The bonds are issued in multiples of Rs 1,000, Rs 10,000, Rs 1 lakh, Rs 10 lakh and Rs 1 crore.

These are available at specified branches of SBI and any account-holder compliant with know-your-customer (KYC) norms can buy these bonds. Donors can donate the bonds to their party of choice, which can then be encashed by the party's verified account within 15 days. The bond does not carry the name of the buyer or the payee.

The political party does not have to disclose who it has received the bond from in its account nor does the donor entity have to state the party to which it has donated. Also, as per the scheme only eligible political parties with 1% vote share are eligible to buy electoral bonds.

The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), a non-government organisation (NGO), has been raising



the issue of political funding through electoral bonds by anonymous donors. An analysis by ADR shows that Lok Sabha 2019 elections saw the highest ever anonymous funding through electoral bonds. Between FY17-18 and FY18-19, political parties received a total of Rs 2,760.20 crore from electoral bonds as donation, ADR says. In its plea filed in October last year before the Supreme Court, ADR had called sale of electoral bonds just before election as "corruption on a huge scale".

"Certain amendments made through the Finance Act, 2017 and earlier Finance Act, 2016, both passed as money bills, and which have opened the doors to unlimited political donations, even from foreign companies, thereby legitimizing electoral corruption at a huge scale, while at the same time ensuring complete non-transparency in political funding," the plea filed by ADR says.

The plea contends that the Finance Act of 2017 had introduced the use of electoral bonds which is exempted from disclosure under the Representation of Peoples Act, 1951, thereby opening the doors to unchecked, unknown funding to political parties. "The said amendments have removed the existing cap of 7.5% of net profit in the past three years on campaign donations by companies and have legalised anonymous donations," added the plea. (IPA Service)

Courtesy: The Leaflet

TO THE EDITOR

Much ado about preserving culture

Editor, The demand for bringing our state under Inner Line Permit (ILP) regime on the pretext of protecting the unique culture, language and traditions of the Khasi, Garo and Jaintia people is bereft of any solid reasoning and devoid of any statistical data which can illustrate large scale infiltration from across the border (read Bangladesh) and influx (?) from other states of the Union of India. It is ironical that despite having so many constitutional safeguards such as reserved assembly constituencies, Land Transfer Act, Sixth Schedule, job reservations, income tax exemption and other protections, sections of tribal society still feel insecure whereas the depleting minority non-tribal communities residing in the state, who are afforded no protection whatsoever from the Government and its administration still manage to preserve their culture and traditions in the state. This proves that ultimately, it is the people alone who can preserve their culture and traditions, not any laws or regulations. After all, the

majority of the state's people had voluntarily chosen to forsake their own traditional customs by embracing a foreign faith a century and a half ago. In the course of this conversion, they chose to disown their traditional faith, adopt foreign names, adopt western dresses for social functions and imbibe several other features of an alien culture. Yet, over a century later, our state continues to be wracked by calls to preserve "indigenous culture" while the practice of indigenous culture is now limited to a small section of the population, due to the choices of the native communities themselves.

If we truly wish to preserve the unique culture of our state, we must call for empowerment and promotion of the followers of the traditional faiths and practices, through legislation and by directing the district councils and other bodies to, above all, safeguard these faiths and practices. After all, these practices represent the only truly "unique", "indigenous" and "traditional" aspects left in our society, in contrast to the other faiths practised in our state that have billions of adherents in our country and abroad.

Yours etc., N.K. Kehar Shillong-3

Who will be vaccinated first?

Editor, Everyone is talking about the anti-Covid vaccine and who will be the first to be vaccinated. As per Government of India notification, the health care professionals will receive the vaccine first followed by elderly citizens. Then what about those in the Government? Should they not be protected first so that they can protect the state and people? I would suggest that the Chief Minister and Health Minister be the first to take the vaccine. However, since both have already had Covid it is possible that they have developed immunity against the virus. In that case the Deputy CM and his senior cabinet colleagues should volunteer to take the vaccine and prove to all of us that it is safe and had no side effects.

In Meghalaya it is very difficult to convince people to be inoculated or to take vaccines. Even the polio drops for babies are considered unsafe by many parents and they refuse to take their babies to the health centres. I wonder how many

people will agree to be vaccinated and whether it is compulsory for all to take the vaccine. Of course we all want to be protected from Covid-19 and its various strains but that is provided someone else has been vaccinated before us and not reported sick. We need that bit of reassurance. Now what happens if there are side effects? How severe will it be and if the person who is vaccinated requires treatment who will bear the cost? Will the state government take responsibility? All these questions arise as we arrive at the cusp of a new health regime where crores of Indians will be vaccinated. Another question that comes to mind is the temperature at which the vaccine is to be stored and whether the facilities are in place in Meghalaya. We have not heard much on this score. Will someone please enlighten us?

Yours etc., CK Kharbuli, Via email

Humanity above all!

Editor, It is high time to question whether mere utterance of "Happy New Year" would ensure happiness from the very first dawn of

the change of the calendar! Rather we should all go all-out to make the New Year and the society happy by undertaking concrete steps.

Just because "I am safe" or "not affected" does not mean that I would remain indifferent to the tragedy of hundreds who passed away prematurely in bank queues while trying to deposit or withdraw their own money or the vulnerability of the millions of wage-earners who lost their jobs in the wake of demonetisation! How many of us feel the inconsolable pain of the lakhs who have passed away due to Covid or that of the family of the hundreds of the poorest of poor who had passed away in due to near starvation on highways and railway tracks while forced to indulge in the "Long March" thanks to the instant lockdown without notice or the suffering of the millions who have lost their livelihoods due to the after effects of lockdown! Far from trying to feel their plight, Indians promptly joined the rhetoric of banging plates and lighting torches! Can a mere piece of document be allowed higher place in society by overriding the highest truth of humanity! If "No", then how can we afford to remain indifferent to innumerable persons already languishing

in jails just because they could not produce certain documents as demanded and lakhs of others are set to move to detention centres! Or take the case of Rohingyas! Why can't we see our own children in the faces of the Rohingya children who are witnessing hell under God's sky along with their kith and kin! Why can't we realise that had destiny played its cards otherwise, we could ourselves have taken birth as Rohingyas! No wonder enlightened persons like Rabindranath Tagore had repeatedly asserted that humanity is far greater than nationalism.

Real happiness can be achieved in the society only when we feel sympathy and empathy in our souls for our fellow human beings. This will obviously lead to protest against injustice and torture which will also bring to an end all such ills thereby leading to a truly happy society where all days appear new enriching and worth living for.

Yours etc., Kajal Chatterjee, Via email

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

"It's not the voting that's democracy; it's the counting."

— Tom Stoppard

The Shillong Times

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Yes to central vista

THE way is now clear for the Central Vista project that will see a new Parliament Building and administrative complex rising along the historic Rajpath in the national capital. The Supreme Court, giving its nod on Tuesday, has taken note of the objections that were raised mainly on grounds of environmental protection and advised the central government to take salient aspects into consideration.

The apex court considered all points including the points raised by the Centre, like the requirement for a new building for the Parliament complex. The old building is expansive but not big enough to accommodate more members when the constituency delimitation exercise is undertaken in the near future. The expense for the project is Rs 20,000 crore. This is time for the nation to take money out of the exchequer to strengthen the national infrastructure so that markets will rev up after the deadly hit they took due to the Covid-19 pandemic in the past year. Creation of job opportunities for the lower rungs of the population thus, is also a welcome step.

The Opposition has raised objections to the Central Vista project, saying this was not the time for the government to spend on such lavish exercises. Indian democracy is still not mature enough to have national consensus even on matters of urgency and special requirements. The urge to oppose any governmental step comes naturally to the Opposition politicians. The BJP too had been on several avoidable offensives against the UPA government till 2014 but now expects the Opposition to cooperate with the Modi government. Such tendencies stall progress. Nations like China have a deficit of freedom, which also guarantees faster progress. In this geographical area, both examples are evident.

Going to court and putting hurdles in the name of environmental protection is a major obsession with activist groups too. The problem, often, is that they are not being realistic but take up the fight mainly to win free publicity. Several vested interests have used such fora to play around and mess up with situations. This affects credibility of genuine advocacy groups too.

What came from the apex court is the last word. The project can be taken forward and completed as per schedule. Governments should have the resolve to take matters forward and this applies to other projects too. Several highway projects have been stalled for several years due to hyper-activism. It is also important for governments to attend to genuine grievances and seriously organise re-settlement/compensation plans so that resistance to infra projects can be neutralized.

God save America as Trump sets to settle scores with Biden

The model democracy in the world witnessing a bizarre drama

By Sushil Kutty

January 5, 2021, is the Georgia senate runoff and if the Republicans lose "we'll change America" is what Democratic senate minority leader Chuck Schumer promised a couple of months ago, soon after Joe Biden was declared winner by television networks on November 4. Since then, the Republicans are petrified, their "American way of life", which is essentially the "Christian way of life", will go for a toss, forever transformed.

Globalism will take over and Congress will part with American dollars to pay for gender equality in Pakistan and democracy in China and for sundry other goals in places elsewhere. The two Democratic Senate candidates Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock are according to the Republicans, dangerous leftist radicals with Ossoff dangerously close to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). If he makes it to the Senate, you can kiss goodbye to "everything American in America."

President Donald J Trump was the other night in Dalton, Georgia, hours before polling for the runoff was to begin, and he struck a positive note while insisting and urging Republican Georgians to "get up and go vote if that's the last thing you do." Trump, who is himself refusing to concede the November 3 Presidential election to Democrat 'President-elect' Joe Biden, said at the Dalton rally that "very big things are going to happen in the next two weeks." Trump, after losing many court appeals to rescind the elections in five states, including a couple in the US Supreme Court to "probe the widespread election fraud", which the apex court summarily refused to hear, is making a last ditch effort to "set things correct" by asking Republican Congress members and Republican Senators to "object" to Biden's electoral votes and deny the Democratic President-elect his day in the White House.

The certification and counting of the electoral votes will be taken up on January 6 at Capitol Hill, the day of the Georgia Senate runoff, and it'll be a tumultuous affair. At least 12 Republican Senators and over a 100 Republican Congress members are all set to object. When they do that, it will kick in two-hour debates in both houses and then

there will be voting. If somehow Biden doesn't get the required 270 electoral votes, Donald Trump will prevail and remain President.

Of course, it's dicey and the Democrats are a mite nervous, that's for sure. Trump's unpredictability makes them and everybody else nervous and a little jittery. There's been talk of Trump "declaring martial law" and "invoking the Insurrection Act." In fact, the day after his "election defeat", Trump fired his Defence Secretary Mark Esper

and appointed Christopher Miller Acting Defence Secretary. Since then there is always been this feeling of something hush-hush. So much so, the other day, 10 former Defence secretaries wrote a "piece" in the Washington Post warning Trump not to "use the army" to settle political scores, and attempt to "overturn the Presidential election."

At that time Trump was on another trip, busy on a telephone call with the Secretary of State of Georgia asking why the hell was he not looking at the "overwhelming evidence of voter fraud" in Georgia and not ordering an inquiry into it, including a forensic signature audit. "Hundreds of thousands of illegal votes were cast, all I need is 11,780 to win in Georgia," he told Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, not knowing that the audio of the call was in the public domain and everybody from Tom, Dick and Harry to Jane, June and Nikki Haley were dropping in on it.

Later, hours after the "personal phone call," Brad Raffensperger admitted that he was the one who made

arrangements to "leak" the audio of the call to Washington Post. By then, Trump had sued Brad under the Secrets Services' Act. Now there's talk of impeaching Trump all over again. Some people are even calling for his arrest. Notably one gentleman by the name of Carl Bernstein, who was one of two journalists whose reportage led to Nixon's impeachment in the Watergate scandal. Bernstein labelled Trump's call a criminal act and called for his immediate arrest.

But Trump is as if without a care in the world. He's behaving like he will be in the White House well after January 20, 2021, which is the ordained date for the "peaceful transfer of power"



and for President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration. All the evangelicals and born-again Christians and everyday Christians (all of whom are automatic Republicans and therefore Trumpicans!) are waiting for "God" to set things right on January 6, confident that God will deliver. They packed churches on Sunday, January 3, "praying for Trump" and "our beloved America," telling each other on multitudes of online forums not to fret and fume as "God is Great" and will "never fail His Children."

It's all kind of surreal and to Hindus who go around funning and punning about their multitudes of gods and goddesses, it's all a big joke. Now, why would Jesus drop in to settle a United States Presidential election, when he never even bothered to "even things electoral" in Italy, which is right next to Vatican, or Israel, which is where the Son of God was born 2020 years ago!

Anyway, the fact of the matter is, the youngest democracy of the world, which also claims to be the most powerful country/nation in

the history of the world, is mostly in two minds these days. Along with the coronavirus, the virus that is democracy has eaten into America's vitals and now there's been so much experimentation on democracy in the crucible of democracy that everybody in the democratic melting pot that is the United States of America is confused.

Millions are worried about their future and the future of the United States of America. At the back of the mind is the dreaded dragon - China, and the long shadow China's casting across the Pacific. "Beware the CCP" is the Republican war-cry even as everybody, from Donald Trump to Trump's wife Melania Trump, are accusing Joe Biden of being "compromised" because Joe's son Hunter Biden has business ties with CCP honchos in Xi Jinping's pocket borough China. Joe smiles away these allegations saying Hunter Biden is the "smartest man" he's ever seen and not to worry! There's something of Dhritarashtra in Joe Biden, but then who doesn't at Joe Biden's age?

To round off, crazy things are happening in America. An Indian journalist who got a green card and went to the States in January 2020 returned for a short visit in December 2020 and he was no longer the Modi-bhakt that he had been before he left. Now, after his sojourn in New Jersey, he was a Biden-bhakt! Yep, that kind of struck in the solar plexus. But then a bhakt here will be a bhakt there, too! The thing to worry was how to refer to him? Oops, "him" and "he" and "she" and "her"; "mother" and "father"; even "first cousin", all mention of "gender" are banned in Capitol Hill.

That is the latest. In fact, if anybody says "Amen," that "person" has to add "Wo-Amen" to be gender-correct, according to Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. And, Oh yes, Jesus is out the Capitol Hill window. In fact, the "pastor" who said the prayer the other day in the House, who added "Wo-Amen" to "Amen", took the name of the "monotheistic God Brahma," much to the astonishment of the evangelicals and born-again Christians of Trump's "Maga Party." God save the Americans, and America! (IPA Service)

Farmers' agitation assuming character of another freedom movement

Prime minister should give up his ego and repeal laws

By Arun Srivastava

After 40 days of peaceful non-violent satyagraha, a situation reminiscent of the famous 1942 "Do or Die" movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi, is fast emerging on the political horizon with the farmers' not willing to accept anything below scrapping of three black farm laws and providing legal status to the MSP acquiring a new dimension and dynamics.

If it was the reluctance of the British to listen to the Indian voice that forced Mahatma Gandhi in 1942 to give the call for Quit India Movement, this time, in 2020 end as also the beginning of 2021, it is the arrogance of the government not to concede to their demands that has forced the farmers to hold their own Republic Day parade in Delhi in protest against the unwillingness of the government to concede their demands.

The farmers plan to organise the twice-rescheduled tractor rally on the KMP (Western Periphery) Expressway as practice for January 26. On January 23 — the birth anniversary of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose — farmers across the country will march to their respective Raj Bhavans since the governors represent the central government in the states.

Though the Modi government has been inviting the farmers to the table to discuss their problems, its obstinacy to accept their pleas has been at the root of talks. So far seven rounds of talks have been held, but shockingly the government has not shown its eagerness to find a solution.

True enough failure of seventh round of talks held on January 4 did not come as a surprise. It was on the expected line; Modi government would not agree to the proposition to repeal the contentious laws. This has been the part of the strategy to frustrate, exhaust and break the morale of the farmers. Once they are exasperated they will abandon their agitation and go back to their villages.

Though the agriculture minister announced that the 8th round of discussion will take place on January 8, going by the mood and posture of Narendra Modi it can safely be said that it would also prove to be a futile exercise. The government is trying to engage the farmer leaders in psychological war and is using all kind of intrigue to enervate them.

The farmer leaders also made it absolutely clear; "we will not agree to any alternatives". It is indeed shocking that the Modi government was pushing its own people to the wall and forcing them to resort to a protracted struggle. While the Modi government has been maintaining the façade of engaging the farmers in dialogue, farmers' organisation All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), has come out with the accusation that the police in Haryana has been resorting to violent action against them.

In fact thirty-five students of Panjab University have written to Chief Justice of India (CJI) S A Bobde and other judges of the Supreme Court seeking an inquiry into alleged police atrocities on the farmers protesting at Delhi borders against the three farm laws. In the open letter, the students of the Centre for Human Rights and Duties of the university have alleged that there has been "illegitimate use of water cannons, tear gases shells and lathis on peaceful protesting farmers" by police authorities which needs to be probed.

Meanwhile in a major move Reliance Industries

has distanced itself from the contentious farm laws. This is being viewed as a major setback to the Modi government. RIL has said it neither buys food grains directly from farmers nor is in the business of contract farming. The company said, "RIL have not done any 'corporate' or 'contract' farming in the past, and have absolutely no plans to enter this business." On the vandalism of towers and telecom infrastructure owned by Jio, the company moved the Punjab and Haryana High Court seeking urgent intervention of the government.

With the Modi government determined not to concede to the farmers' demands of not allowing unregulated private 'markets' in competition with APMCs; giving a legal guarantee for MSP; and, not allowing the entry of corporates into purchase of and trade in agricultural produce, the farmers' are left with no other alternative but to take their struggle to a new heights. This is for the first time the Independent India has been witnessing this nature of complete non-violent, peaceful protest which has been witness to the death of 57 innocent farmers at the protest site.

The most shocking scenario has been while the farmers wept at the death of each farmer, the ministers participating in the deliberations were unmoved. Three more farmers died at the Singhu and Tikri borders; they were Jagbir, 66, from Jind district, and Jashpreet, 18, from Bathinda, died in Tikri, while, Shamsher, 44, from Sangrur. They were found dead inside a truck at Singhu protest site. It is indeed a matter of shame that the government does not feel guilty. For it the farmers' who died in the chilly winter did not count as human beings.

Nevertheless the agitating farmers have posed a question for the Prime Minister. What are the disadvantages of withdrawing the new farm laws and who stands to lose if they are withdrawn? While the farmers reiterate that they do not need such laws, Modi is insistent, you ought to have these as these are for your welfare. It is an open secret that he has been thrusting these laws down farmers' throat to serve the interest of his corporate friends particularly Adanis and Ambanis. Nonetheless he ought to realize, by maintaining silence he was pushing the country into a black hole. He is ruining the future of the next generation.

Modi claims that these laws will transform farmers' lives. If he is so confident then why is he evading them and does not sit with them across the table and explain them the benefits. Instead he has been playing the brain game and using all machinery to break the agitation.

Farmer union leaders have warned the government that it should not take their agitation lightly and think that it can be handled like the Shaheen Bagh protest against the citizenship regime. The warning came a day after the younger generation of protesters gathered at Shahjahanpur on the Rajasthan-Haryana border and pushed their way past barricades.

SKM leadership also cautioned that the collective leadership of the movement might not be able to rein in the youngsters if the government continued to test their patience. While the blockade of Delhi will continue, they will broaden the movement by mobilising opinion across the country with a "Desh Jagriti Abhiyan". (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Isn't the purpose of healthcare to help people?

Editor,
Indian governments have been controlling and micro-managing the lives of residents since independence. The so-called "pandemic" has given governments another excuse to carry on in this time honoured tradition of interference in the personal affairs of citizens. None of the quarantines, border closures, mandatory mask orders or stay-at-home orders are supported by science. Mass lockdowns are a novel experiment that have never been tried before. In fact, the World Health Organization in a 2019 report recommended against contact-tracing, quarantine of exposed individuals, border closures and entry and exit screening of travellers.

Due to the reallocation of resources, the single-minded obsession on the novel coronavirus has come at the expense of upholding the rule of law and providing high-quality services to the population for other healthcare concerns like cancer screening, diabetes treatment and mental health.

My father, a former In-

dian Administrative Service officer who served in Shillong but resigned in 2000, has written a book called "The Great Hysteria and the Broken State," explaining these facts. His analysis of Swedish deaths data suggests that there is barely a blip in terms of excess deaths. In short, there is no pandemic discernable from Sweden which was perhaps the only country to treat its citizens with respect rather than imposing coercive lockdowns.

Isn't the purpose of healthcare to help people in a holistic fashion? If so, then why is pandemic policy purely political and not grounded in medical science? I would challenge anyone who disagrees to cite a peer-reviewed article published 2019 or earlier advocating mass scale lockdowns of the kind that we have seen.

Yours etc.,
Sukrit Sabhlok
Queanbeyan, New South
Wales, Australia

On Khasi identity and culture

Editor,
Deepa Majumdar's article "Real clouds of Meghalaya" (ST Dec 25) is soul stirring. She has conveyed a deep message to us on the state of our tribal

community (read Khasi). In her inimitable style and erudition, she has brought home an unpalatable message. My kudos to her for giving us some new ammo for preserving our pristine culture and faith system. Despite the conversion of nearly 75% of our population over the past 150 years, that the Seng Khasi and Sein Raj have been able to hold on to a small but committed section of tribes to their fold is creditable. When I was a student, I used to read and hear about the great Khasi revivalist O. Mawrie who after practising Christianity for many years and converting a good section of Khasis to Christianity, realised his folly. He not only denounced Christ but also declared a virtual war. His fiery articulation was to a large extent responsible for rest of us remaining rooted to our own indigenous religious beliefs. Mawrie, who had occupied the position of a Pastor, ought to be saluted for his courage of conviction. Mawrie's single-handed crusade for halting the conversion by the church should be regarded as the biggest single contribution by any Khasi towards retaining our Khasi identity.

I really wonder how my fellow Khasis feel about the adoption of western values through religious conver-

sions that have deeply corroded our culture and identity. It should be hurting some of them especially those who are crying their voice hoarse for preservation of our tribal entity. As a member of Seng Khasi, I personally don't consider the Khasi Christians eligible to portray themselves as pure Khasis. They are essentially Khasi Christians who are completely sold to the influence of the West as represented by the church. Indeed, religion is a matter of pure personal choice. Any Khasi is free to embrace any religion. However, once a tribal gets converted to another religion, he ceases to be a pure tribal. For, he has forsaken his indigenous tribal belief system and opted for an alien religion and the concomitant western influence. I can't foresee a large section of the Khasi Christians returning to their original moorings. But that's their own choice and the consequences of losing tribal identity too is theirs. History will judge them. For now, all we can say is that the revival spirit is sweeping across the tribes, especially those who are in the rural areas who take great pride in being the true inheritors of the Khasi identity and cultures. May their tribe grow from strength to strength.

Yours etc.
Sain Manik Lyngdoh,
Via email

Indigenous faith and culture

Editor,
I am happy to note that like the trend in Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills where the indigenous religious groups have begun to organise themselves, we find that our brethren in Garo Hills have also woken up. The Garo Songsarek, the near extinct religious belief system of the Garos, recently organised "Krittann" (the local name for Kirtan of the plains people). Hundreds of Songsarek followers came out proudly to renew their faith in their ancient custom and tradition. They played the drum (mridanga), cymbal and other traditional instruments, sang chorus devotional tunes which echoed in hills of Achikland. This is truly remarkable resurrection of a dying religious practice. I am sure, it is only the beginning.

Yours etc.,
Sulekha Marak,
Via email

Why we should be vaccinated

Editor,
Apropos the editorial, "Vaccine regime and trans-

parency" (ST Jan 5, 2021), as a medical doctor I agree that evidence based medical practice is of utmost importance since it involves the lives and health of people. But reports from countries like Finland that have started administering the vaccine since December 27, 2020 say that most side effects of vaccines are mild and temporary, such as redness or swelling at the point of injection. Sometimes a vaccination can also be followed by a short-term fever as well as limb pain and headaches that can be treated with antipyretics and NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug). Hence there is no need to give in to the fear psychosis that has been spreading mainly due to hearsay and the grandstanding by the Opposition. However, I would also agree that the final phase of the process needs to be made public before launching the vaccination programme. And the impact on the 1600 volunteers also needs to be publicized. Transparency is the best way to kill fear and superstition. And vaccination is the only way to tackle Covid including the latest strain.

Yours etc.,
M Singh,
Via email

"My failures have been errors in judgment, not of intent."

— Ulysses S. Grant

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Dilli Chalo programme

LEADERS of political parties in the present government have decided to take their case for implementing the Inner Line Permit (ILP) to Delhi. This once again lends credence to the contention that Delhi does not pay heed to demands by the people of the North East. Delhi is the nerve centre of Indian politics and the North East is furthest in terms of physical and mental distance both. Whether the Inner Line Permit (ILP) is really needed at this juncture when there are enough legislations to protect the indigenous tribals, is debatable. However the political leadership and the pressure groups seem to have converged on the same idea — that the tribes need more protective legislations even if such laws hamper the economic and competitive edge of the state and its people in a world that's rapidly trundling towards globalisation and interdependence. Competition sharpens the intellect and prepares the young to stand on an equal footing with the best minds in the country and even internationally. The indigenous tribals are already protected by the Reservation Policy. This has curbed the spirit of enterprise of successive generations of tribal youth and adults of Meghalaya and slackened their pace to push themselves to achieve what they can without the crutch of reservation.

More and more people beyond Shillong are now expressing their fears that tourism will take a plunge and deprive them of their honest livelihoods away from the government sector. They are also sceptical about the ILP solving anything at all. Many point to the fact that government is using the ILP demand as a cover-up for its failure to govern and to create economic opportunities for its burgeoning youth population.

Taking the ILP case to Delhi does not mean that the Centre will be pressured to give in. A Government that does not blink at the nearly month long farmers' protest on a legitimate cause and also a Government that with one stroke of the pen revoked Article 370 in Jammu & Kashmir is unlikely to take a tame view of attempts at turning Indian citizens into foreigners in their own country. How the ILP was granted to Manipur is of course another matter and had perhaps to do more with the complex politics in that state where 35 % of its people comprising the tribal population claim exclusive rights over 90% of its land mass while the rest 65 % of Meiteis who are also indigenous but are considered non-tribals because of their religion occupy only 10 % of land mass.

Incidentally students' groups from Assam are also headed for Delhi by March this year to press for the ILP in the state. With this, barring Tripura all the states appear to believe that ILP is the antidote to the CAA. By the look of things the ILP demand is going to be a long haul even as North Easterners camp at Delhi.

When "rule of law" becomes "rule by decree" in parliament Court is now more 'executive minded' than the executive

By Vaidushya Parth

In the Indian constitutional scheme of things, the work of Parliament is to make laws (legislation), check the work of the government (scrutinising the role of the executive), and to conduct debates on current issues of public importance. Generally, the decisions made in one House have to be approved by the other. In this manner, the two-chamber system performs as a check and balance. This set-up was introduced to ensure that no branch of government becomes too puissant in command and authority.

This bicameral legislature is the first line of checks against any arbitrary executive action. The basis of an Upper House and its position and function in parliamentary democracy has always remained a subject of passionate and fiery debate. In the accounts of Constitution-making, there were occasions when statesmen, writers and thinkers expressed antithetical views on the efficacy of an Upper House. Some held that a Second Chamber was destructive of "the will of the people", illustrated and manifested through the publicly elected Lower House, while others underlined the need for such a House as "a safeguard against the tyranny of a single-chamber Legislature".

In the Constituent Assembly, during a discussion on the need for a Second Chamber, divergent views were expressed. The following reasons were cited in favour of it: (a) the requirement for a second look at Bills which may be the product of electoral equations or the tyranny of the popular majority; (b) the Second Chamber is more deliberative and nuanced; (c) the Second Chamber acts as a check on hasty and ill-conceived legislation; (d) it strengthens the federal structure.

On the other hand, the great French constitutional expert, Abbe Sieyès, who rejected the concept of a Second Chamber, said: "If a Second Chamber dissents from the first, it is mischievous; if it agrees, it is superfluous." Responding to this criticism, Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, said in the Constituent Assembly: "The [second part] of the criticism of Abbe Sieyès is undoubtedly valid because it is so obvious. But nobody has so far [endorsed the first part of the criticism] of Abbe Sieyès."

The Lok Sabha (the Lower House) is a publicly elected chamber. The political party with the largest number of seats there forms the government. It alone is responsible for making decisions on Money Bills. The

Rajya Sabha can consider these Bills, but cannot block or amend them. The Lok Sabha, in effect, if not in form, begins to serve as an executive, rather than a legislative (which it is ideally supposed to be) organ. The Lower House, inter alia, is therefore swayed by public passions, engrossed in ugly equations of electoral politics and eventually results into the epitome of majoritarianism.

Therefore, without effective bicameral legislative checks, the government of a parliamentary constitutional republic, at best, becomes an elected autocracy, and the sacrosanct "rule of law" takes the face of the



notorious "rule by decree". To counter this, the Rajya Sabha, the second House, is independent of the elected Lok Sabha, and more balanced and delibera-

popularly elected government. Its creation is a counter to what James Madison saw as the "fickleness and passion" that could absorb the publicly elected House. He noted further: "The use of the [Upper House] is to consist in its proceeding with more coolness, with more system and with more wisdom, than the popular branch."

The framers of the Indian Constitution consequently attempted to erect the government — following the Westminster model — on the edifice of various limits, controls and checks between the executive and the legislature. More importantly, this separation of power was not

intended to be a mere matter of form but of substance. In recent years, the government, however, bamboozled this separation of powers by bypassing the Rajya Sabha through the instru-

In the present case though, even those "provisions" were absent. The question, therefore, of whether a statute violates the provision of the Constitution is one of illegality and open to judicial review. It is another matter that the next election cycle is around the corner — so many of them have passed ad interim — yet, the constitutional challenge to electoral bonds is waiting to be heard before the Supreme Court after nearly three years.

mentality of the Money Bill (s). Notably, certifying a Bill as a Money Bill, which otherwise is a normal Bill, has serious consequences, as it rules out the security of the Rajya Sabha. Of late, there have been continued and deliberate attempts to prevent the Upper House's scrutiny of Bills passed by the Lok Sabha, including the Electoral Bonds Scheme.

The manner adopted in passing these Bonds is symbolic of its arbitrary provisions. The Act was introduced as a Money Bill in the

Lok Sabha and passed by it after rejecting five amendments proposed by the Rajya Sabha despite completely lacking the character of a Money Bill.

At the outset, the law related to Money Bills needs to be clear. Article 109 of the Constitution lays down a special procedure with respect to Money Bills and Article 110 lays down strict criteria as to the categorisation of a Bill as a Money Bill. Clause (1) of Article 110 defines what will constitute a Money Bill. However, as per clause (2), the mere inclusion of some provisions relating to the matters listed in Clause (1) cannot transform the character of a Bill from an ordinary one to a Money Bill.

In the present case though, even those "provisions" were absent. The question, therefore, of whether a statute violates the provision of the Constitution is one of illegality and open to judicial review. It is another matter that the next election cycle is around the corner — so many of them have passed ad interim — yet, the constitutional challenge to electoral bonds is waiting to be heard before the Supreme Court after nearly three years.

Even more recently, the Upper House was bypassed in a distinct fashion by passing the controversial three farm Bills through a voice vote despite repeated demand for division of votes. This can only be termed as a "fraud on the constitutional values".

Also, the suspension of the Winter Session is a furtherance of the same agenda-escaping legislative checks. These incidents illustrate the worrying trend in the parliamentary system and its working. It would also be very naïve to suppose that these are isolated cases and therefore, don't imply a clear pattern. They are, in fact, not merely points on a plane, but exemplify an entire curve, and is a recipe for disaster.

For these reasons, the popular government is hell-bent on diluting various legislative checks and the inherent parliamentary idea of consensus and debate. The essential safeguard of a bicameral legislature against arbitrary executive action has become redundant.

So what is the solution? On paper, there has been much talk of the Aadhaar judgment — that the Speaker's decision to certify a Money Bill is subject to judicial review. But is this solution of any real value considering current trends where the Court, in the immortal words of Lord Atkin, has become "more executive-minded than the executive". (IPA Service) Courtesy: The Leaflet

Indian Constitution and the law courts? If I recall correctly the apex court had clearly stated that coal cannot be mined without a Mining Policy and we don't have that Policy as of now, so under what law is coal being mined? Is it not a case of the State Government itself allowing the illegality to thrive? If the Government is itself indulging in illegalities then who can hold it accountable?

An apathetic public that is too afraid to take on the coal lobby is what has emboldened them. Ministers make a cut from check gates without flinching. Meghalaya is destined to remain a failed state.

Yours etc.,
TR Mynsong,
Nongpoh

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

Assange judgment a stunning victory of free speech and humanity

Prime investigative journalist has now to adjust to his new freedom

By Tim Dawson

AS Judge Vanessa Baraitser started to deliver her ruling in the Old Bailey's number two court on Monday nothing felt right. Proceedings started late. Julian Assange slumped in the dock, surrounded by bullet-proof glass, his clothes flapping slightly around his diminished frame. They Don't Extradite Assange campaign had decided against a rally outside the court building because of the risk of spreading Covid-19. The very air tasted sour.

As Baraitser intoned her summary judgment, the atmosphere deteriorated. She dismissed the defence case unequivocally, point by point. The protection of those accused of political offences implied by the US/UK Extradition Treaty was worthless in this case. Assange is accused of actions that would be offences in the UK, she told the court. His actions could not be compared to those of an investigative journalist and by dumping data he had adversely affected scores of US contacts. She declined to consider the uncontested evidence that CIA contacts bugged the Ecuadorian embassy to snoop on Assange's meetings with lawyers. And she found ample evidence that a fair trial would be available once the WikiLeaks founder arrived in Virginia.

By now, Assange appeared to be deflating in the

the barrister representing the US government, was quick to her feet, insisting that an appeal against the ruling would be immediately forthcoming. Her interjections are always highly controlled, but anger apparently underscored her words.

Edward Fitzgerald, meanwhile, had rediscovered his Tiggerish bounce. He requested his client's immediate release. That may happen on Wednesday. The court hearing will reconvene at Westminster Magistrates' (its real home). Fitzgerald promises to make a case featuring both the deteriorating conditions at Belmarsh and a considerable package of measures to reassure the court that Assange would not abscond. This is a stunning victory for free speech, common sense and humanity.

Assange heard the news from the same dock where the Guilford Four were wrongly convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1975. It would be refreshing to think that yesterday's judgment showcases a new era when British justice can be rightly praised for its compassion, fairness and honesty. A little restraint with the champagne is required, however, as the response from the National Union of Journalists makes clear.

"The judge rejected the defence case that the charges against Assange



dock before our eyes. One sensed a great weight pressing on the usually ebullient shoulders of Edward Fitzgerald QC, who leads Assange's legal team. Baraitser's cautious delivery continued as she reached her conclusion, providing no prompt of a change in her direction of travel.

In September the extradition hearing spent a week considering medical evidence relating to Assange. Much of it was harrowing and, unlike all the other expert statements, written copies were not released to the media — despite formal protests. Baraitser, however, accepted most of the doctors' and psychiatrists' conclusions.

Assange has a personal and family history of suicide attempts, he suffers deep, long-term depression. He also has autism spectrum disorders. These have been managed with some success in HMP Belmarsh, the judge told the court. Then she turned to conditions in the US "supermax" prison, ADX Colorado, where it is generally accepted Assange would have been sent, if he had been sentenced by a US court.

"Faced with the conditions of near total isolation without the protective factors which limited his risk at HMP Belmarsh, I am satisfied the procedures described by the US will not prevent Mr Assange from finding a way to commit suicide and for this reason I have decided extradition would be oppressive by reason of mental harm and I order his discharge."

The air in court felt suddenly lighter. A broad smile flashed across Assange's face, and the handful of WikiLeaks staff in court were animated anew. Clair Dobbin,

related to actions identical to those undertaken daily by most investigative journalists," commented general secretary Michelle Stanistreet. "In doing so, she leaves open the door for a future US administration to confect a similar indictment against a journalist."

It is a prudent caution. Of course, it is hard to imagine a similar circumstances prevailing — the most extensive and damaging national security leaks in history, an ex-CIA director running US foreign policy, and a president whose grasp on reality is tenuous at best.

As became clear during the extradition hearing, however, this conjunction appeared against a backdrop that is increasingly challenging for those who report on defence and security issues. Several witnesses described US administrations "going into overdrive" to classify more and more information.

Rising levels of hostility to the media have been fuelled by administrations of both stripes increasing enthusiasm for chasing down and denigrating leakers who were clearly honestly intended. It makes it hard to believe that Assange will be the last person the US tries to prosecute for acts of journalism.

Assange departed the dock wreathed in smiles, having caught a quick chat through the security glass with his partner Stella Morris. He faces challenges too — not least adjusting to freedoms that he has not enjoyed for a decade. His defence made much of his appreciation of transparency, methodical checking and concern for the welfare of others. If he chooses to return to public life at some point, my hope would be that he makes these his guiding principles. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

The ruler's ego

Editor
I am writing to express my deep appreciation for this article by Arun Srivastava: "PRIME MINISTER SHOULD GIVE UP HIS EGO AND REPEAL LAWS" (ST, Jan 6, 2021). Unfortunately hard-heartedness, or heartlessness is often misunderstood as firmness. Yet the two are total opposites. For, as Gandhiji said, firmness comes from love. But Mr. Modi's government does not appear to love the ordinary Indian citizen or the underdog.

In general theocracies do not work. When capitalistic they become even more dysfunctional. For God and mammon were never meant to go together. Love of money hardens the heart like nothing else. Ethical forms of patriotism and nationalism should translate to love for the under-

dog and the ordinary citizen -- not love of power or money!

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Mawkhar church affairs

Editor,
Apropos the news report, Charge sheet against Mawkhar church fraudster likely this month (ST Jan 6, 2021), as a member of the Mawkhar Presbyterian Church I am deeply saddened that a matter in which church funds meant to be used to assist the poor and downtrodden was instead used by some devious members to feather their own nests. This is unprecedented but what is worse is that politics seems to be playing a dirty role to protect the fraudsters. When religion and politics mix things can get very

ugly and this is exactly what has happened in the present case that was detected since 2019 but has come nowhere near closure. May I ask what is it that hinders Meghalaya Police from timely investigation and charge-sheeting the culprits in this case? We as church members need to know what is it that the police are looking for. As far as I know, all documents and books of accounts have been provided by the Church authorities to the police. How long does it take to establish guilt? At this rate will anyone ever be booked for any crime in Meghalaya? It makes us frustrated and pessimistic about the very existence of a police force that is not known to play by the rules.

What also is baffling is that the pastor-in-charge at the time of the commission of the crime who had since that time not attended church services is now being admitted back by the

Synod and will probably be given a new assignment. What sort of justice is this? Does forgiveness in Christianity not mean that the person has to first repent? And what about the unjustified suspension of Rev K Pyrtuh by the same church merely because he differed with the Synod on the issue of Aadhar Cards? Rev Pyrtuh has been an RTI activist and has his own methods of serving a social cause which to the church may be unorthodox but I can say without any doubt that his actions are what Christ would have commended.

It's a sad state of affairs when murky goings-on within the church are to be decided by secular institutions that are given to all kinds of predilections. I sometimes wonder which way Christianity is headed and whether Christ approves of what is happening in Christianity today.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

Has NGT allowed coal mining?

Editor,
Meghalaya is back to the same old ugliness of vehicles being stranded on the way to Guwahati courtesy the hundreds of coal trucks that now block the way for other vehicles to proceed. The MDA government has allowed free transport of coal via Assam and beyond and we the public have to pay for this mess. What is the NGT doing? Has it allowed coal mining to resume in full swing? If not then how can coal be illegally mined and transported without anyone protesting? Does Meghalaya operate with rules that are different from those laid down by the

"We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both."

-- Louis D. Brandeis

The Shillong Times

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Ominous signals from Capitol Hill

PRIMA facie, the violent protests at Capitol Hill in the US by Trump supporters have come as a major embarrassment for the system of democracy that the US is in the forefront of practicing and preaching. President Trump himself worked the crowd to a frenzy to subvert a popular mandate, and alleged that victory has been stolen from him by "explosions of bullshit". The march was essentially to thwart the process of counting of electoral votes of swing states that he had lost in the November polls. The presidential election this time was marred with unprecedented chaos and the end is not in sight even though just days are left for the scheduled inauguration of a new President.

If democracy in the US faces such odds, the situation elsewhere in future can only be imagined. It was the success of the democratic system practised by the US -- the world's oldest democracy -- that inspired others to adapt to this governance system. India -- the world's largest democracy -- ably carried forward with this system ever since Independence. Europe as a whole is wedded to this governance system for long years. Most countries in Asia and Africa as also Latin America are carrying on with this system.

While democracy has its flaws and requires periodic political reforms to take it forward in healthy ways, the fact remains that there is no other governance system that ensures a direct role for the people to run their governments. If the US ends up in chaos in the context of alleged irregularities in the election process, the signals it sends out to the wider world are somewhat worrisome.

The kind of demonstrations that Capitol Hill saw on January 6 was unheard of in US history. Pro-Trump protesters unleashed mayhem, shots were fired inside the Capitol and there was enforcement of curfew in cities like Columbia. It was in the coming, though. During the campaign period itself, Trump had told his white supremacist supporters to "stand by" if a situation arose of him having to step down from power by an adverse electoral verdict. He got ready to pose legal challenges.

Yet, it would appear that Trump would finally quit and give the chance to elected Democrat nominee Joe Biden to take over as President. However there is every likelihood of the next four years turning into a grim experience for both Joe Biden and the United States of America. Point to ponder is, how the scenario has come to such a pass. If America is rudderless, it could also mean the world as a whole will be in turmoil in multiple ways.

Democracy challenged in its abode

By Patricia Mukhim

For hundreds of years we have lived with the idea that there is no alternative to democracy and therefore think highly of this system of governance although we are increasingly realizing even here in our own state that we are actually promoting oligarchy. Look at the composition of the Assembly today. There are three families that are dominating the politics of Meghalaya and some more families are plotting how to get as many relatives in by the next election-2023. But in the ancient Athens where democracy took shape Socrates the great Greek thinker was very pessimistic about this system. If he was alive today, Socrates would have said, "I told you so," after what happened in Capitol Hill yesterday.

In Plato's 'The Republic,' Socrates has a conversation with someone called Adeimantus and points out to him the many flaws of democracy. He uses the metaphor of a ship and asks Adeimantus if he would board a ship whose captain has no idea of how to steer it or would he look for an experienced sailor? Adeimantus naturally says he would only trust a seafarer who has seen and navigated many a storm. Socrates then asks Adeimantus why is it that people believe that just about anyone should be fit to rule a country?

Socrates wanted to drive home the point that voting in an election is a skill, not a random intuition. To allow an illiterate citizenry to vote is like putting them in charge of a ship and asking them to steer it through stormy weather. Socrates became the first victim of democracy when he was tried with trumped up charges of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens then. Athens being a democracy, the trial was decided by a jury of 500 Athenians and a slim majority decided he was guilty. Socrates died by drinking hemlock -- a poison.

To say that India was not ready for democracy in 1947 is an understatement. Democracy requires an informed citizenry that is not so impoverished as to be bought with a Rs 500 or Rs 2000 note once in five years and be happy with that bribe.

Democracy requires a certain ability to judge a candidate and vote the one that comes closest to expectations of fairness, empathy, ability to govern and responsiveness. But all these qualities have been subsumed by both greed and need for money. The elec-

torate knows that it is pointless expecting anything from the MLA/MP/MDC in the next five years after he/she is elected. The only time they can exploit the person is before elections. Even if the amount received is a measly one time bribe of Rs 2000 or 5000, the elector today is so impoverished that he/she would take that amount to vote the bribe giver. About 85 % of the electorate don't care whether the MLA is able to provide good roads, drinking water, healthcare, education, sanitation etc., -- the key elements of govern-

tics to further their business interests.

In a democracy people are expected to give voice to their concerns and not to outsource those concerns to pressure and interest groups. In my interface with people in rural Meghalaya there are many that wish to speak up but have no platform. The problem is that all such public platforms have been hijacked by the demagogues within and outside politics. When pressure groups claim to speak for "the people," they are lying. The word "people" is itself

have another demagogue who recently stated that he wants to start a revolution in Meghalaya. He has not spelt out what the revolution intends to achieve and if it is something along the lines of the French Revolution where the rulers would be brought to their nemesis or whether that revolution is simply to create space for his political revival.

Politicians know how easily people seek easy answers to the most obstinate problems. I recall a politician who claimed he was going to create 10,000 jobs (I cannot recall if he said 10k annually or in his 5-year term) but he never as much as created 500 jobs. Most of the people appointed were in the department/s he held and they were mostly fourth grade jobs. If that is the idea of job creation then we can imagine the breadth of thinking that the person has. It begins and ends with his constituency and he cares a damn about the growth and progress of the state.

Look at Meghalaya today and the subversion of the rule of law vis a vis coal mining and transportation. All of us have accepted that this is kosher. None of us care that we have slowly but surely undermined the rule of law which is the basis of democracy. Without the rule of law we are a faux democracy. The principal beneficiaries of the coal trade are those in government and their relatives. The proscribed HNLC who seem to know more about these trade secrets than journalists, have let out all they know about the money made from check gates and who the money goes to apart from other serious allegations. These are causes of concern because the money is to ensure the continued win of a set of politicians who will continue to bleed the state dry. It's a very frightening thought that Meghalaya will have dwindling opportunities for our young generation in the years to come because the ruling conglomerate just does not care to think of a future beyond five years.

And here we are -- the thinking elite -- all silent and watching idly while Meghalaya is mortgaged to opportunists. There is nothing that is of public interest here. What is public interest anyway? It is a fig leaf for hopelessly corrupt bureaucrats and politicians to shield themselves from scrutiny and accountability. No apologies for the dystopia expressed in these columns week after week. After all one sees nothing to be hopeful about!

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Only a united struggle by agitating farmers can help in repealing laws

Supreme Court hearing may not bring relief to farmers

By Arun Srivastava

Agitating farmers have no reasons to be optimistic of a favourable verdict in their favour when the Supreme Court will hear on January 11, a batch of pleas challenging the new farm laws as well as the issues related to the on-going farmers' protest.

On Wednesday the apex court dropped enough indication that it would prefer dialogue between the farmers and government by observing "we encourage consultation" to find a solution to the impasse rather than pronouncing a judicial verdict. The emphasis would eventually be more on discussion once the Central government told the court that 'healthy discussions' were going on with farmers over these issues.

Intriguing indeed how could the government tell the court that there was a good chance that parties may come to a conclusion when it is an open secret that the arrogant attitude of the Modi government on the issue of repealing the three farm laws and legalising the MSP has resulted in complete breakdown of all the seven rounds of negotiation. The farmers are apprehensive that filing of the wrong response by the Centre on the pleas challenging the new farm laws might foreclose the negotiations between the farmers and government.

There is no denying the fact that the Central government was misleading the Supreme Court. In fact apex court's stand on the farmers' agitation also raises the question why it has been allowing the government to perpetrate psychological and physical torture on the striking farmers. While the government has been using legal, media, state power to terrorise the farmers and force them submit, the farmers have only one instrument, the right to resort to Gandhian satyagrah. The most unfortunate has been Modi government launching vilification campaign against the farmers and using police force to terrorise them in the states where the BJP is in power. Haryana police have positioned cargo containers on the road to block protesters.

The farmers' leaders say that Modi government has jeopardised not just the farming community and India's food security but also the country's democracy. They accuse it of following Pakistan's example of using container trucks to block off protesters. Nevertheless Independent India has never seen such a protracted pro-

test that has been so peaceful.

It is a general consensus that the judiciary does not differentiate between powerful and weak, between the rich and the poor, but the fact cannot be denied that in this case the Supreme Court should have extended moral support to the poor farmers who are sitting on Delhi border in this chilling cold. Already not less than 62 farmers have died of heart attack and other illnesses.

On December 17 the apex court had refrained the government from evicting them from the site by observing "farmers have right to protest" however it would have done a great service to the nation and its annadata by ordering to put the implementation of farm laws on hold till it decides the issue. At least this should have protected the farmers from being tormented and blackmailed by the government.

Like all elastic objects the perseverance has also got its breaking quotient and it must not be stretched beyond a certain point. The way the Modi government was handling the issue, it was simply forcing and provoking the farmers to lose their patience so that it would become easier for the rulers to let loose the reign of terror on them. The Supreme Court must take cognisance of the patience and perseverance of the farmers. The court ought to be reminded of its own order "A protest can be constitutional till it does not destroy property or endanger life".

It would not be an exaggeration to say that court's trust has been betrayed by the government. On December 17 the court had said that the purpose of a protest can be achieved if the farmers and the government will hold talks and "we wish to facilitate that". However a look at the proceedings of the seven rounds of talks will reveal that the government was not at all willing to concede to their demands, instead it was simply interested in keeping them in a state of pendulum.

Chief Justice SA Bobde, has expressed the view that the matter must be handed over to a committee. But farmers' bodies have outright rejected this proposal. They nurse the view that this will only help the government in achieving its mission. The All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) on Friday said the issue of the ongoing farmers' protests against three new farm laws needs to be resolved by the government. (IPA Service)

Socrates wanted to drive home the point that voting in an election is a skill, not a random intuition. To allow an illiterate citizenry to vote is like putting them in charge of a ship and asking them to steer it through stormy weather.

In my visit to the rural areas of Meghalaya I see roads that are mostly eaten away by rain water because the mix at the time of construction did not pass the crucial test.

There is something that the Greeks called intellectual democracy which they believed is the kind of democracy needed. It means that both the elector and the

misleadingly elected. Who are those people? Have the pressure groups been authorized to speak on my behalf? I never gave away my right to be spoken for. I can speak for myself.

In a democracy, the elected representatives are supposed to talk to their people from time to time and ask them if they agree on the policies implemented

Socrates became the first victim of democracy when he was tried with trumped up charges of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens then. Athens being a democracy, the trial was decided by a jury of 500 Athenians and a slim majority decided he was guilty.

elector are intellectually inclined; can debate on issues and are able to make a rational decision at the polling booth. In this country and in our state, people vote on several considerations barring the right ones. People make emotional decisions based on religious affinity, personal relationships, the ability of the candidate to throw money around and to make promises that are never fulfilled.

This system of democracy that we have given birth to in Meghalaya has produced a set of demagogues who can sweet talk the electorate but whose unspoken intention is to get into poli-

and decisions taken on their behalf. Without that, the elected are co-opting people's voices and that amounts to subterfuge.

Meghalaya has had several examples of demagogues that have made it to politics merely with rhetoric and noise. When people are disillusioned by a failed system they tend to invest their faith on demagogues. Sadly people don't learn lessons and this is repeated every five years. Every five-year term produces new demagogues. Once inside the assembly they lose all their bluster and begin to make excuses for what they cannot deliver. Now we

TO THE EDITOR

Boycott Republic Day!

Editor,
Good governance in Meghalaya is at the crossroads. Bad governance already has a deleterious effect on the performance of our state and the quality of our government employees' lives. Should things continue as they have been for decades as a reactive, administrative cost-center? If Meghalaya is to break free from this role of the past, surely it will require a new model of leadership. Yesterday, KHNAM legislator Adelbert Nongrum urged the people of the state to boycott the upcoming Republic Day celebrations and also stressed on the need to honour honest government employees like P. J. Marbaniang and lohbianghuh Sakhkar with an "Integrity Award".
If people like lohbianghuh Sakhkar and P. J. Marbaniang are defined by one thing, it is certainly their courage and honesty - key ingredients missing in many state governments and corporations. After all, how much courage does it take to enforce the rules? Alas the

higher echelons hide behind protocols. Courage isn't really needed until the battle to transform an organization is waged. To change cultures is difficult. To slaughter sacred cows is dangerous. Yet, this is where the truly transformative work of an honest leader is done. If our respected leaders are fearful, then they can never be effective. For the state to evolve and transform, state government representatives will need to be challenged, policies will need to be changed, and many "business-as-usual" practices need to be eradicated. This will require us to push beyond our fear and to be courageous.

It is imperative that representatives answer some critically important questions:
What is your purpose (i.e., Why are you here as a leader)?
What is your purpose in your department?

In my opinion, too many MDs seem to be acting with the purpose of not rocking the boat. For too long, the MDs' purpose has been to enforce the policies of the organization and faithfully execute the directives of the

department. These purposes are not only out of date, but they are actually doing harm to our organizations. Now more than ever, our government and corporations require a strong people strategy led by a strong "corrupt free" team. As a leader, you must be able to succinctly define and articulate an answer to the first question because those who follow you need to trust your motives and commitment. Secondly, you need to lead your team through a process of defining your purpose.

Meghalaya is in the midst of a revolution. This revolution will be led by those who lead with passion, purpose and courage. Instead of fighting with arrows, axes and swords, we will do battle with intelligence, innovation and guts. And we must persist and we must prevail. As the war for change intensifies, government servants will increasingly feel under attack. Each day, practicing honesty in the workplace can feel like fighting a battle where there are insurmountable odds against success. We need brave-hearts like lohbianghuh Sakhkar and P. J. Marbaniang who can overcome great odds to secure

victory.

Yours etc.,
Cathy Lyngdoh
Shillong - 793008

Indigenous spiritualism

Editor,
Indigenous communities and their individual members draw their identity and form their world-view from specific historical and cultural contexts that include their own beliefs, social organisation, languages, customs, and knowledge. Most of the indigenous societies have seen their traditional orders disrupted through contact with the more powerful societies. The impact of colonialism saw traditional indigenous social structure eroded. In the identification of these dimensions, Seng Khasi and Sein Raji Niamtre, a socio-religious congregation of the Khasi-Jaintias of Meghalaya, India was established to act as custodians of indigenous people, their belief system, cultures, languages, and way of life and seek their protection under national and international law. These organisations seek to preserve, promote and nurture the culture and

cultural heritage and the philosophy of the indigenous religion of the Khasi-Jaintia tribes of Meghalaya. Ironically, the western observers and commentators dismissed Indigenous religious tradition as superstition and had not historically recognised Indigenous spirituality. Hence, there is a need for indigenous spirituality to be recognised as a religion and belief, so that freedom of religion and belief for indigenous Khasi-Jaintia can be effectively promoted and protected. It is the government's obligation to protect the minority indigenous group.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Omarlin Kyndiah
Via email

Raising the age eligibility bar

Editor,
Most tribal people in Meghalaya, generally, would complete their Bachelor's degree at the age of 23 years and Master's degree at 25 years. Those who have completed their Bachelor's degree would have 9 years left to get a government job while those who have completed their Master's degree would have 7 years left which

is a very short time considering the extreme difficulty in getting a government job from the year 2000 till date and which will be more difficult in the coming years.

This current status of cut off age for job eligibility at 32 years for STs is suited for the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s where jobs were still easy to find but most certainly not suited from the year 2000 onwards. Hence, we have to adapt to the changing times

as other states in India have done as far as age eligibility is concerned since many of our youth need more time and preparation, to find government jobs. They have to apply to various state and central governments, go for job coaching programmes especially for mathematics and logic and then write these various exams which are conducted one year post the advertisement as is the case with state government exams.

For confirmation, the officials and the public can scroll through the eight State Public Service Commission's of the eight North Eastern

States respectively. They reveal that Meghalaya has the "Lowest" cut off age for the tribals at 32 years of age. Tripura has the highest cut off age for the tribals at 45 years of age, while Assam and Manipur have the second highest cut off age for the tribals at 43 years of age respectively for any government post including their own state civil service. The table is shown below:

State's Name	Age Eligibility	For state tribals relaxable by 5 years
1. Arunachal Pradesh	18 - 35 years	37 years
2. Mizoram	21 - 35 years	40 years
3. Manipur	21 - 38 years	43 years
4. Assam	21 - 38 years	43 years
5. Tripura	18 - 40 years	45 years
6. Sikkim	18 - 40 years	No extension since 40 years cut off age
7. Nagaland	21 - 30 years	35 years
8. Meghalaya	18 - 27 years	32 years
Average Cut off age		38.75 years ~ 39 years

Hence Meghalaya should have an age eligibility of 21 - 34 years relaxable with 5 years for the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Scheduled Tribes (STs) at 39 years of age with a one year extension of 40 years for those applying for MCS, MPS & MFS candidates. We urge the government to increase the age eligibility cut off bar to 39 years for the Local STs

that is the Khasi, Jaintia & Garo applying for all types of governments jobs and 40 years for all types of State Civil Services. The officials can also check for the other 9 states in mainland India which have a tribal populace. They have similar age relaxations to those of the other 7 North East states except Meghalaya. The time has come for the State Government to immediately raise the

age eligibility cut off bar for the local STs to be at par with other states of India because since the new millennium getting a government job has become well nigh impossible. Hence this government accept the suggestions above.

Yours etc.,
M Lyngdoh,
Via email

"Not voting is not a protest.
It is a surrender."

-- Keith Ellison

The Shillong Times

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Delay in project execution

MEGHALAYA is known for delay in execution of several projects but the longest pending one that still lies incomplete is the Hotel Crowborough Project in the heart of the city. That half-constructed hotel stands testimony to the half-hearted efforts of the government to take every project to its logical end so as to ensure that there are no time and cost overruns. The bridge along the Shillong bypass was constructed several years before the road was made. It received no facelift when the brand new road was constructed. It has started to crack at the beams and even the repairs carried out on that bridge are temporary in nature. They show a complete lack of accountability in ensuring that the bridge serves its purpose of creating a bypass so that coal and cement laden trucks, with loads that surpass the permissible limit by three times the weight, do not need to pass through Shillong City and through the Umiam Bridge which was never designed to support the weight of hundreds of trucks carry loads of thirty metric tonnes each.

The news that a Bailey bridge normally used by the army to quickly span ravines in difficult terrains will be used in Umroi as an alternative to the present unusable bridge at Dwar U Ksuid is welcome news. A Bailey bridge is a portable, pre-fabricated truss bridge which takes just 24 hours to assemble and yet is strong enough to withstand enormous pressure. It was developed in 1940-1941 by the British for military use during the Second World War and is now extensively used by all military engineering units worldwide. Bailey Bridges have also been used for quick communication when natural disasters like earthquakes and flash floods etc. destroy existing bridges.

In Meghalaya roads and bridges have been the worst for wear. This summer several bridges especially in Garo Hills were carried away by flash-floods. Many of the bridges in rural Meghalaya have seen extensive wear and tear and will not hold for long. They are a glaring testimony to the shoddy work done by the Public Works Department (PWD) which has never been held accountable because citizens don't care enough to question the government on these badly constructed public utilities. The presence of the Lok Ayukta would be meaningless if cases are not brought before this body for adjudication. While the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) keeps a check on the spending of different departments of the government, it is not in a position to carry out tests on the quality of materials used in road building projects and in constructing bridges. Even within Shillong city there are bridges that have been dismantled for expansion but have taken more than a year to complete although they are only about 200 metres in length. Unless the public take the bull by the horns governments will continue to be lackadaisical in their approach.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson will not be the Chief Guest at the iconic Republic Day Parade this year. For the first time since 1966, the parade, even in a diluted form, will pass without a foreign dignitary unless Prime Minister Modi finds a substitute to Johnson. Modi is now known for springing surprises by taking sudden decisions; some of which are felicitous and some others decidedly dangerous. From such a point of view, inviting Johnson was a risky proposition. For instance, if Johnson could not manage a last-minute Brexit deal, he would have gone from Downing Street like his predecessor Theresa May, whose premiership was consumed by the controversy around Britain exiting European Union.

The explanation given out by Johnson's office on the cancellation of the visit is the menacing mutation of the Covid virus, which was noticed first in UK. The third lockdown in Britain perhaps necessitates the PM's availability in the country. Johnson has promised to visit India early this year, certainly before he hosts the G-7 summit. It's also important to note he has extended the invitation to Modi to attend the summit. So far, so good. But some of the Indian media and observers of India-UK relations suggest it is more than what meets the eye.

The cancellation is attributed to the Indian Diaspora, which is one and a half million strong, being deeply concerned about the ongoing farmers' protest. The protest is led largely by the Punjab farmers and coincidentally, majority of Indian Diaspora in UK consists of migrants from Punjab. It is worth underlining that 15 MPs are of Indian origin, three of them have Cabinet positions and two have important portfolios like Finance and Home. So, obviously, Indian Diaspora has influence in British politics.

At home, protesting farmers are already thanking Johnson for showing sensitivity towards their cause and agitation and cancelling the trip. Apparently, there is some truth in the farmers' assertion that it is in deference to their movement that it has happened. It is a matter of an easy conjecture that Britain was gripped by Corona when Johnson accepted the invitation and he did not cancel it as soon as

the mutation of the virus was detected. He called it off when the MPs raised questions in support of the farmers and a tractor demonstration to Delhi was announced by the protesters on the Republic Day.

Meanwhile, movement leaders have announced that, for two weeks, 'Desh Jagran Abhiyan' (National Awareness Movement) will be started and protest will be deepened throughout the country. One of the Movement's spokespersons said, "We have decided that on January 7, we



will take out a tractor march at four borders of Delhi including Eastern and Western peripheries. This will be a trailer for what lies ahead on January 26".

Let us recall that the farmers have been vigorously protesting against the three controversial farm laws since over a month. Several rounds of talks have taken place between the government and movement leaders without any tangible conclusion. Farmers have announced to intensify their agitation and not to back out until a satisfactory solution is arrived at. At this critical juncture, it is no surprise that Johnson called off the visit. However, it's quite unusual for a Chief Guest to terminate such an important visit.

According to an ANI tweet, the farmers had announced that they would be writing to the British MPs asking them to stop Johnson from visiting India till their demands are met by the Centre. The MPs have expressed their support for the farmers and raised the issue in Parliament. A Labour Party MP Tanmanjeet Singh had raised a question on the farmers' agitation, "We are horrified to see water cannons, tear gas and brute force being used against farmers, peacefully protesting in India. Every-

one has the fundamental right to protest peacefully". He had also urged Johnson to convey the sentiments of the Punjabi (Sikh) community to Modi.

The MP from East Southall, along with 35 MPs wrote to the Foreign Secretary Dominick Raab, requesting him to raise the farmers' issue with Indian government. In addition, 25 community and charity organisations, religious persons, and councillors of Indian origin have written a joint letter to the Indian High Commissioner in Britain and

British Foreign Secretary. Coming back to India-UK relations around the proposed and cancelled visit of Johnson and the impending trip of Modi, it's in order that we touch on some silent points. India-UK links are historical and substantial. In addition to a sizeable diaspora, the flow of people from both countries is big; half a million tourists go to Britain annually and twice that figure comes to India. Around 30000 Indians study in Britain in spite of restrictive opportunities for employment etc. Britain is among the top investors for India whereas India is the second biggest investors in Britain.

Following Brexit, as Britain looks beyond Europe for trade and diplomacy, India is one of the best candidates for building partnership. But the prospective partnership is easier imagined than implemented. Johnson has his plate full of challenges. He had propelled himself to national politics through a campaign against British membership of EU. Having secured the divorce from the EU, Johnson has to deliver development, growth and restore British role in international politics. Johnson is known to be a colourful and controversial leader often projected in the media as a frivolous politician. But he

has tremendous capacity for manoeuvre and staying on.

On New Delhi's part, it is unclear where Modi puts Britain in his priority list. His propensity for populist leaders is well known. That is why Modi's warming up to Donald Trump and his alter ego Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and now Johnson is understandable. Both Johnson and Modi should remain Prime Ministers, all being well, till next elections in both countries in 2024. So, given the interpersonal dynamic of Modi's foreign policy, it is expected that India-UK relations should grow.

Modi visited UK in 2015 when six major agreements were concluded. Signing agreements around the high-powered visits is normal in diplomacy. But there is no mechanism for strictly scrutinising the implementation of the agreements before new ones are concluded. From New Delhi's point of view, the sticking point, however, is his hesitation in signing economic partnership agreement. New Delhi has been engaged sporadically with the EU in futile negotiations of a trade agreement since 2007.

Ironically, Britain was the deal-breaker in these negotiations. Now, it is likely that London proposes to New Delhi a similar FTA. The same hurdles encountered by the negotiators from Brussels and New Delhi are likely to re-emerge in dialogues with Britain. However, politics is the art of possible and diplomacy is ever so dynamic, there is room for manoeuvre and optimism.

To conclude, whatever may have prompted Johnson to call off the visit, New Delhi should be wary of all possible angles. If it senses that the farmers' agitation may have contributed to Johnson's decision, it must take serious note and do the needed course correction. At any rate, the farmers' protest is becoming an international issue; therefore, the government should resolve it at the earliest. Foreign policy is a reflection of national culture, values, capacities and concerns. The ongoing farmers' agitation does not portend well for India's foreign policy. Hence the government must make haste. --- *INFA (The writer is Prof. International Relations, JIMMC)*

UK PM cancels visit

Pandemic or protests!

By Dr. D.K. Giri

Trump supporters showed how far rightists can go to throttle democracy Participation of some indians with flag is highly deplorable

By Arun Srivastava

It was a bloody coup attempted by the rightist forces which was masterminded by the president of the USA Donald Trump, in which at least four persons lost their lives, nevertheless the Congress ought to be congratulated for foiling the conspiracy to prevent the Biden presidency from taking charge.

It would be wrong to say that a mob spontaneously barged into the Capitol and occupied it. The fact is Trump had planned it with the help of his rightist mercenaries. The rightist forces attempted the coup in the form of a violent riot that stormed the Capitol building. An insight into the sordid incident would unravel the truth that the coup was planned and executed in full knowledge of the administrators. It underlined the complete collapse of the most powerful administrative machinery in the world.

The USA administration was aware of the machinations of Trump and ought to have taken full proof security measures as it was known to everyone who matters in the administration that Trump would resort to such anti-democratic action. Trump had spent months stoking the anger of his supporters with false claims that the election was stolen and rigged.

Throughout the world the right reactionary forces have been trying to throttle the democracy and democratic institutions. Obviously their action at Capitol has not come as a surprise. In fact what has pained is in their quest to continue to stick to the power and mis-

strong hand tactics of Trump. It would not be exaggerated to say that Republicans extended support to Trumps lies and his politics of deceit.

One fails to make out how the entire Republican leadership could subscribe to the lies and baseless claims of Trump that the election was stolen from him. It is worth recalling that before election, Trump had pressured the attorney general to investigate his opponent and his son, after being impeached for pressuring a foreign state to announce its own investigation into his opponent's son. He had also fired the chief of the Pentagon, along with other top officials for not falling in his line.

In 1852, Karl Marx had observed that historical occurrences may occur the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce. Marx was mocking Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte who had just seized power in a coup (or, in the interest of technical precision, an autogolpe), declaring himself emperor. Louis-Napoléon did indeed seem like a figure worth ridicule, but the well-heeled members of ruling classes often confuse lack of propriety for weakness.

Amongst the rightist elements who invaded Capitol, there were good number of Indians carrying Indian national flag. By indulging in this type of activities they have simply lowered the image of the country. As Indians residing in the USA they are free to do whatever they like, but from where they got



use the administrative machinery they have been indulging in all kinds of despotic actions. In fact this is a warning to the global fraternity. And anyone would date to ignore it at the cost of inviting his own peril. What has been really disgraceful is these people have been resorting to all such nasty actions on the plea of safeguarding the sovereignty and constitution of the country.

The rightist elements disrupted the proceedings that was in the process to complete the recognition of the election of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. The plotters violated the constitution and overrode the will of the voters. It is absolutely clear that the mob outside would not have existed without the tacit support of the politicians inside.

The citizens of the great democracy, the USA, must be complemented for electing a person who has turned America into the new land of coups; of course they must be rest assured that this was neither the first nor the last coup it would face. With Trump on the political scene they must get ready to witness more such blood incidents.

Some may argue against describing this as a coup as it was not carried out to overthrow of a sitting government. However they ought to know that the technical term for attempting to stay in power illegitimately—such as after losing an election—is also a coup. The most shocking aspect of the coup has been tacit support of the Republicans to Trump in carrying out this operation. They could have cautioned him from lowering the image and prestige of the nation. But ironically they behaved like a spineless creature in the face of the

right to carry the Indian flag during the coup? This nature of activity is certainly not in the interest of India and would simply jeopardise the bilateral relations with America.

Trump is creating the chaotic and confused conditions for a potential political confrontation. His intention all along has been to destroy the political order. It cannot be denied that the kind of violence which took four precious lives, has been completely authoritarian, a way to try to force other people to submit to the will of the perpetrators. Yet another aspect of the violence which was visible was the involvement of the white men who were long the only people with power in this country. They under Trump have been presenting themselves as the marginalized and oppressed. Like Indian Hindu upper castes they are scared that others, the blacks will have power and a voice.

These people in recent times have been found to be involved in many racist actions. Trump's eldest daughter and adviser Ivanka Trump described the insurrectionists who stormed the US Capitol building as "American Patriots". The increasingly political violence of far-right gangs and mobs should be a wake-up call to all. If you don't control them, they control you. It is high time the liberal democratic individuals and politicians see the far right threat and get ready to counter their challenge. The siege which saw four people die was among the worst security breaches in American history and came after Trump had earlier urged a crowd of protesters to march on the Capitol and undo his November election defeat. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Jaundiced view of Shillong's 'personalities'

Editor,

This refers to the feature story 'Lessons learnt from 2020' by a few prominent 'personalities' of Shillong published in The Sunday Shillong (ST, 3 January 2021). The views of one 'international' personality as mentioned in the Sunday Shillong edition are deeply critical of the way the "ruling political class" has not "realised the magnitude of the impact of volatility/ uncertainty" of the Covid pandemic. The State and Central Governments have done fairly well in handling the unprecedented pandemic situation. During the lockdown one could witness the orderly manner in which rice, edible oil, sugar etc were dispensed to thousands of people who lined up in front of FCI godowns in Shillong. The line of taxis/tempos extended many kilometres on the roads towards Sohra and Jowai and mostly the needy common people's needs of essential items were met by the Government and its officials. The workload on the Government machinery in heavily populated states like UP, Maharashtra, Tamilnadu, Bihar, etc was much higher. But there too the Govern-

ment machinery has done reasonably well. No doubt, with the advantage of retrospective introspection we can comment that there are many things which could have been handled better—that criticism is needed but in a balanced manner, without giving it unnecessary ideological/religious twist. Even the moon has its dark spots. But perpetual critics forget that!

It takes effort, energy and time to study the situation and the Government's response to it, and then critique it properly. However, the easy way to cheap publicity is to criticize the present Government on the basis of what the author thinks is its "religion centric" priority! These are subtle ways in which many of the so called 'pressure groups'/ unions/ social/ religious organisations scare the common people against the 'other' and then go on to control the society/ common people to serve the private interests of the leaders of these organisations.

Another aspect of the views of this 'international' personality is the jaundiced view of "political priority" of our governments. The "political priority" of the central government is labeled as "religion centric", whereas the Meghalaya government's has been labeled as "populist centric." However, when the PM called for ceremonial

public applause for Covid warriors in the midst of the pandemic on March 22, 2020 he said these words - "On March 22, at 5 pm stand on your balconies for 5 minutes and clap or ring a bell to salute people who are serving the nation tirelessly." Please note that he did not ask people to perform any religion-specific activity. You could clap your hands, or you could beat your dinner plate or you could do nothing! When the Meghalaya CM announces a similar initiative (labeled "Meghalaya Prays") he asked everyone (especially those from North East India) to sing "Amazing Grace" and "How Great thou art" as if the entire North-Eastern India follows the same religion! The 'international' personality does not smell any 'religious' rat in this 'Meghalaya Prays' initiative where in the state government blatantly promoted the single dominant religion despite Meghalaya having a significant minority of Khasi, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Sikh religionists. Instead the central govt is criticised as being "religion centric".

In the broader context the following articles/ letters to editor published in The Shillong Times are very informative: "Our fascination with the West" - Shillong Times, Jan 4, 2021; "Much ado about preserving culture" - Shillong Times, Jan 5, 2021 by NK Kehar;

"Meghalaya - a Christian state?" - Shillong Times, Dec 5, 2016 by Keith Nongsteng. With such brilliant, stimulating and realistic articles The Shillong Times proves itself to be truly a mirror of the mind of Meghalaya's people. Keep up the good work!

Yours etc.,
HK Phawa,
Via email

Install fully functional video cameras

Editor,

This is to request the State Government to install "Functional Video Cameras" in the interview rooms of the MPSC so as to ensure transparency, accountability and to remove any dispute from the aggrieved candidates arising from the interview as was witnessed in the previous notable cases highlighted in the all the newspapers several times. The process was eventually stayed by the High Court. Even in the 2018 MCS Preliminary exam results, 8 or so candidates filed a case in the High Court and the case is ongoing. Hence to avoid any problem arising from the interviews of any post, it is imperative that the government installs fully functional video cameras in the MPSC interview room to effec-

tively ensure that such disputes are disposed off immediately because of the video proof which can be produced in a court of law by the MPSC when challenged by any aggrieved candidate about the personal selection process. This is also something that past legislators have raised in respect of all MPSC posts from Grade 3 gazetted posts to Grade 1 posts in the future with the exception for Grade 4 posts and Grade 3 LDA scale pay equivalent posts or LDA in the Heads of Offices/ Secretariat where written exams are marked on merit basis sans "personal interviews." For DSCs, personal interviews should be banned for Grade 3 and Grade 4 and also at the MPSC for Grade 3 LDA and Grade 4. The exams for these posts at the 11 DSCs will be purely merit based with the marks attained and cut off marks displayed at the DSC websites just like in the MPSC.

Yours etc.,
M Lyngdoh,
Via email

Kudos to Pakistan Supreme Court

Editor,
Kudos to the Pakistan Supreme Court for ordering reconstruction of a century old Hindu temple that was

vandalised in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa just a couple of weeks ago. Also it has instructed the authorities to recover the money for the restoration from the attackers. This is true sense of justice which the whole world is required to learn from this sane humanitarian verdict of the Pakistani Supreme Court. If religious shrines of any particular religious group get demolished by miscreants of any communal outfit, justice can be adequately served only when the miscreants and their leaders are awarded exemplary punishment and they are made to pay for reconstruction of the shrine at that very spot where it stood for centuries.

What are the illogical thoughts, beliefs or sentiments of the goons and communal forces are secondary; rather the Court of Justice should see the hard realities of the existence of the concerned shrine whether for a year, a decade or centuries. Indeed Pakistan's Supreme Court has transmitted a brilliant message across the world by according supreme place to truth, sanity, equality and neutrality.

Yours etc.,
Kajal Chatterjee,
Via email

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

The artist who disdained stardom

By Vishnu Makhijani

Soumitra Chatterjee, the doyen of Bengali cinema who passed away on November 15, 2020 aged 85, leaving behind an oeuvre of over 250 films — a staggering 14 of them directed by Satyajit Ray — five books, four poetry collections, three dramas and an array of paintings, had once remarked that he would have become a carpenter had he not become an actor.

It might sound flippant but his admiration for the craft of carpentry was genuine, revealing that he believed in creativity that was useful, something that would be helpful to people, says the first biography of the actor in English set to release on his 86th birth anniversary on January 19.

"Soumitra Chatterjee's legacy goes well beyond his body of work in cinema, which on its own will probably never be matched. He is best known for being the favoured actor of one of the world's greatest directors and remains one of the most visible representatives of Indian cinema abroad," Arjun Sengupta, co-author of *Soumitra Chatterjee - A Life in Cinema, Theatre, Poetry & Painting* (Niyogi Books), said in an interview.

"However, the range of his accomplishments emerges from his unique nature. He understood the value of education and culture and all through his life remained unwavering in his belief on the importance of social responsibility and artistic integrity. He disdained stardom if it got in the way of his beliefs as an artist.

"He had a varied career that went beyond films. His belief in art and the responsibility of an artist ensured that he brought the same seriousness and breadth of learning to no matter what he did. He was a resolute champion of Bengali language and culture, choosing to dedicate himself to Bengal rather than look for a more national popularity through Hindi cinema. For these reasons and more, he was one of Bengal's greatest ambassadors to the world," Sengupta added, who teaches English Literature at the St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, with previous stints at Scottish Church College and Presidency College.



A considerable amount of research went into the book, during the writing of which Chatterjee was personally involved.

"The research involved going through a number of books that have been written on him and about Bengali cinema in general. This allowed me to place his achievements in a greater socio-historical context. Mr Chatterjee was kind enough to lend us his *Gadya Samagra*, a collection of his writings for reference.

His writings gave me important insights into the kind of person he was. It also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of his pursuits as a thespian, painter and poet.

"I also watched and re-watched several of his films, studying the smallest details to appreciate his craft better. All this was supplemented by hours of interviews of Mr Chatterjee," Sengupta said of the effort he and co-author Partha Mukherjee, a Kolkata-based Freelance Writer-cum-Documentary Filmmaker put in.



To this end, what the book reveals is that Chatterjee did not believe in looking back, and even at 85, kept looking forward to new challenges. This is probably why his death is not a coda because he had so much more to contribute to the world of theatre, art and cinema. Thus, the book is a celebration of his multifaceted creative genius and his role in representing Bengal on the world stage.

The book explores the making of Chatterjee through his early years and his relationships with theatre exponent Sisir Bhaduri and Satyajit Ray. His 14 films with Ray are a testament to his versatility and virtuosity. As an actor he refused to settle in a comfortable groove and constantly looked out for fresh challenges. Throughout his theatrical career, he not only adapted and directed several acclaimed plays but kept returning to the stage for sustenance and inspiration. His poetry and art are more personal and offer an insight into his idealistic and cultured soul.

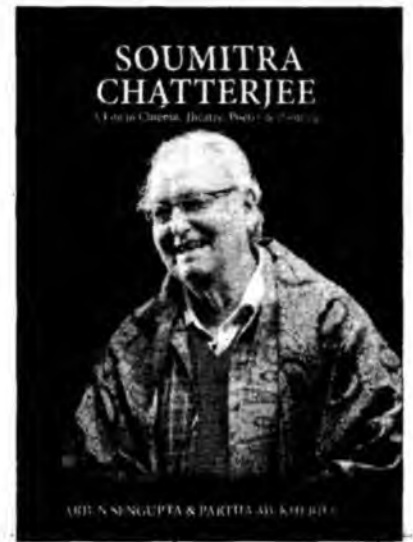
Analysing the most important roles of his career, and charting the single-minded dedication and pas-

sion that he brought to each one of them, the book reflects on Chatterjee's stardom and longevity in an industry that saw great changes during his lifetime. Featuring 70 unique photographs, the book is a visual treat and illuminates the versatile facets of a towering artist — a Renaissance man — who along with Ray brought Bengal to the cinematic world.

What it also brings out is that Chatterjee's poetry and paintings are a distillation of an idealistic sensitive soul. He is forever caught between a desire to escape through memory to an idealised past and a need to engage with the troubles of reality. His art is even more private and personal than his poetry. His paintings are oddly beautiful and could be quite eerie, too. They are nevertheless striking and speak of a vivid and bold personality.

Chatterjee refused to work in other languages. He consciously resisted the lure of Bollywood as he felt his performance gained a lot of credibility from his proficiency in the Bengali language and wondered if it would be the same in a language in which he was not fluent.

His loyalty to his Bengali identity determined many of his decisions in his career. It turned out to be a wise choice because with the help of Satyajit Ray and other acclaimed directors, he managed to stay close to his roots while turning out performances of universal relevance. He has worked in Bengali cinema but in his legacy he belongs to world cinema.



Greener, zero-waste weddings

By Siddhi Jain

Sustainable weddings are in and small is the new big because a more thoughtful approach impacts the planet positively, says Ambika Gupta, a luxe event planner, known for creating transportive weddings for celebrities like actor Kajal Aggarwal. The entrepreneur also encourages a green and yet bespoke design language.

She says, "The pandemic should put things in perspective for us. We cannot now endlessly consume our resources, generate vast amounts of waste and live as if there is no tomorrow because there is. And if we don't change, the next generation will have to deal with the fallout of the climate crisis in a more serious way."

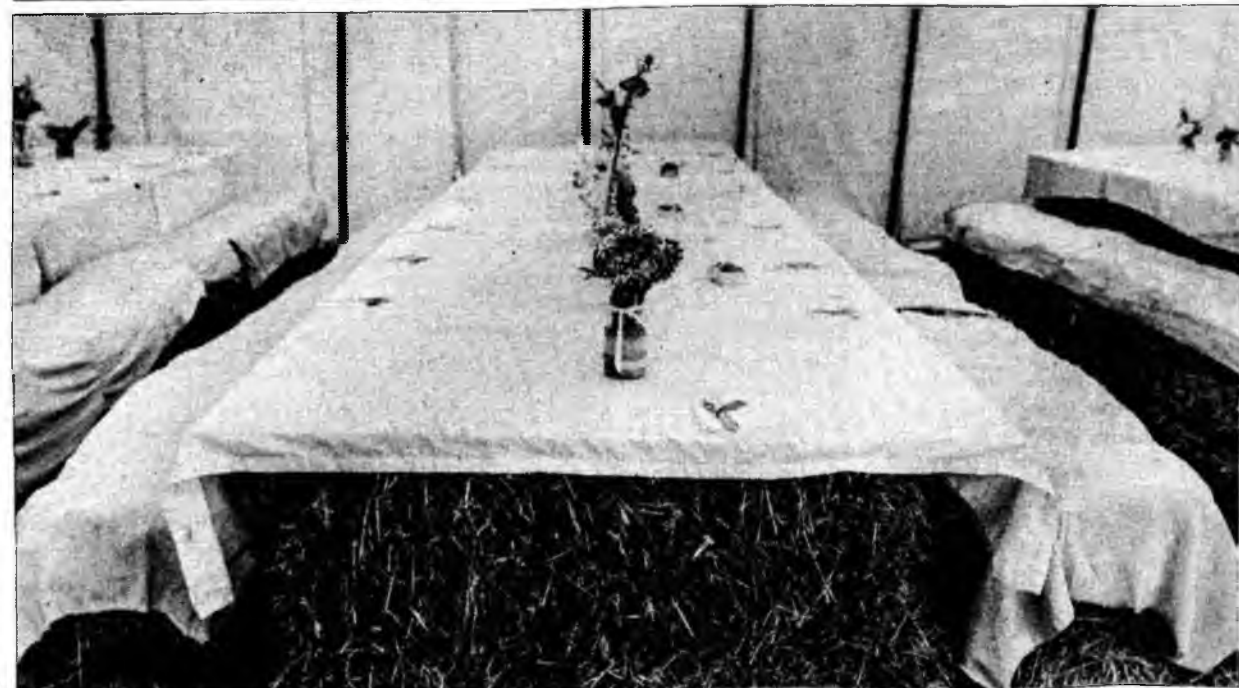
Ambika who founded The A-Cube Project over eight years ago in Chennai found her calling as a much-in-demand designer and planner of weddings. This year, she had to work around the challenges of the post-COVID-19 scenario. As she designed events with safety protocols in place, she says she also started conversations with her clients about greener, more responsible weddings.

Ambika says, "The pandemic has forced families to have smaller events. That automatically cuts down waste but many of my clients are also well-informed about climate concerns and in fact want their weddings to set an example. For instance, for a Pondicherry wedding, the couple and the team worked closely to address the issue of floral and food waste. This was a special request from the bride who is very sensitive to environmental concerns. The flowers were composted and the extra food from each event distributed locally. India Wasted and The Robin Hood Army came onboard to help us manage this."

Her other tips for a greener wedding are

- Order local floral produce as this will cut down the carbon footprint and help distressed farmers in these times. Instead of using excessive floral accents, choose statement arrangements that will really be noticed.

- Instead of store-bought gifts, engage NGOs that support artisans to create one-of-a-kind giveaways. For



the Pondicherry wedding that Ambika designed, jute bags with Van Gogh inspired embroidery were made by Purkal Stree Shakti (An Uttarakhand-based NGO), and gifted to guests.

- Use disposable cutlery and crockery made of biodegradable materials like bamboo.

- Choose wedding cards made out of recycled paper or go for e-invites.

- Use materials like clay, straw, liv-

ing plants, recyclable materials to create props. For Kajal Aggarwal's wedding, Ambika themed an event around a Kitsch Mandi and used Kutch workmanship in furnishings, traditional dry palm weaves, a Chettinad console and brass pots with banana leaves. She also used "pettis", contraptions used by coconut farmers as a backdrop in place of a wasteful prop.

- Consider 'mini-monies' where the number of guests is minimum and the couple get married at a local venue.

- Use classic furniture that can be hired or reused by the designer instead of plastic chairs.

- Think of lighting options that are less energy-consuming

"I read recently that more than 10 million weddings take place in India every year and leave behind mountains of trash, discarded plastic cutlery, used flowers and wasted food. I believe, together, we can all do better than this," concludes Ambika.

A diabolical tale of betrayal

Originally written by Sahana Vijayakumar in Kannada in 2018, *Kasheer: A Diabolical Betrayal of Kashmiri Hindus* in its English translation brings forth to a larger audience the story of Kashmiri Hindus and the unfortunate mass exodus of the community from their motherland in 1990, against the backdrop of Kashmir's Islamisation.

Translated into English after the abrogation of Section 370 in the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, the powerful book comes across as "the plaintive cry of the Kailash Pandit".

Contending that the reporting on Kashmir has whitewashed the human tragedy of Kashmiri Hindus, *Kasheer* retells the tale in a fictionalised account which is all too real, and catches the facts of deception, betrayal, propaganda and political ambitions that have all but erased the memories of oppression of Kashmiri Hindus from the nation's conscience. It extricates the truth of human tragedy and presents it with brutal honesty.

Vijayakumar undertook firsthand research during her visit to Kashmir and interviewed hundreds of locals for the book. According to her, the Kashmir issue cannot be understood without grasping the layers of traditionalism, reformism, secularism and fundamentalism within Islam.

"It is a travesty that some stories go untold, lost in the cacophony of dominant narratives and complex realities. The story of the Kashmiri Hindus is one such tale. As necessary it is to wish that the coming days are filled with optimism for Kashmir, it is equally essential to know the unfortunate story of the Kashmiri Hindus who were driven out of their motherland. This is their story. This is the story of Kashmir," she said about the book.

Covering the genesis of Kashmir and its progress from social, religious and political dimensions, the novel not only visualises both the contemporary and historical pictures of Kashmir, but also scrutinises the underlying philosophies of Sanatana Dharma and Semitic religions, she said.

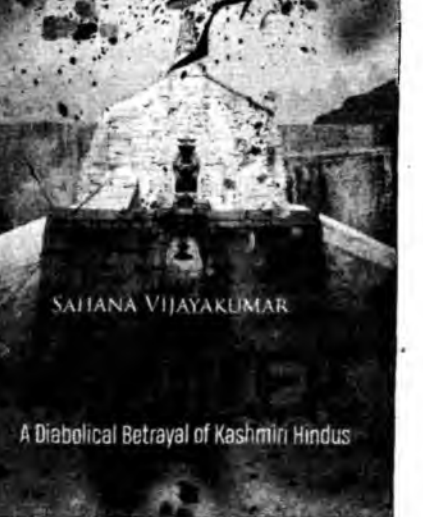
The bold narration uses multiple

metaphors, including that of Aarti Kaul's unconceived womb, to voice out what happened to Kashmiri Hindus. The book derives its name from Koshur language, in which Kashmir translates to *Kasheer*.

Noting that the author has synthesised the historical perspective and the contemporary reality per-

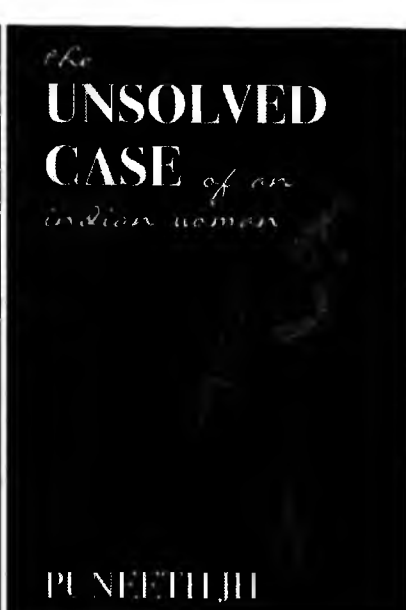
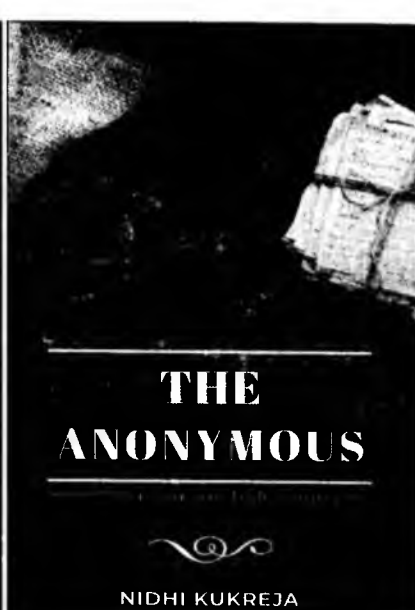
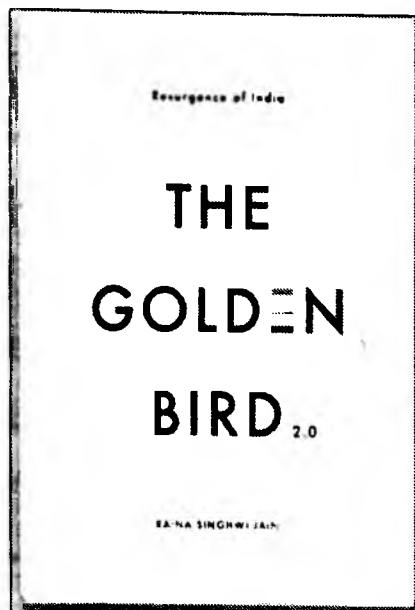
petaining to Kashmir very well, renowned Kannada scholar SL Bhyrappa, who has written the book's foreword, said that she connected with the very few Kashmiri Hindus who have "returned home" and were living in ghettos, and witnessed all the places that bear testimony to thousands and thousands of religious conversions under intimidation, rape, murder and bloodshed.

According to Sankrant Sanu, the Founder and CEO of Garuda Prakashan, the book's story — having come from a South Indian writer — unites the discourse around Kashmir across Indian regions, and reinforces the idea that Kashmir is a national issue.



The Kannada book was translated into English by Hemanth Shanthigrama, a London-based technology professional. It has been translated and published in Marathi and Hindi as well. (IANS)

New Year reads from upcoming authors



From an in-depth read on ancient India's rich economic history, to a quirky look at the Indian 'arranged marriage drama', and two compelling thrillers written by forthcoming Indian writers, these books will have you turning pages from the beginning of the year.

The Golden Bird 2.0

- By Raina Singhwi Jain
The Golden Bird 2.0 draws from India's rich past to take a fresh look at its potential for a glorious future — a second golden age, shaped by the powerful public will, economic wherewithal, and the nation's status as the world leader. What made ancient India the Golden Bird in the first place? What did China, the Land of the Dragon, have in common with India, and when did these two ancient civilizations diverge on their paths to global success? While colonisation pressed the brakes on India's confidence and self-reliance, China emerged from imperialism with a clear vision for its future and strong implementation to boot. The oriental superpower fashioned itself as the world's factory, creating jobs and uplifting millions of people from poverty. How did China make its

mark on the world stage, and where did India fall behind? How can India tap into its golden past to pave the way for a brighter future? Can Atmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India usher in a new era of economic growth and global leadership? A closer look at our journey since independence reveals the gaps that we need to bridge. Can we draw from the vision and ideals of our own freedom struggle to build the next phase in our future? While conventional wisdom suggests improvements in manufacturing, the ease of doing business and digital technology, Jain delves deeper, to draw surprising parallels between other areas that beg our attention — such as process engineering, communication design, journalism, decentralization of power and disaster management.

Sugar and Spice

- By Sonali Punj Singh
Sugar and Spice is the literary depiction of the great Indian arranged marriage drama, the crucial aspects of marriage and how misunderstandings during the thousands of rituals affect the relationships. Here, the soft-spoken, work-oriented Radha belonging to a middle

class family is engaged to a handsome hunk Karthik. It is an arranged engagement. Karthik's family is a typical Indian groom's family that has high expectations from the bride's side. However keeping all these things aside Radha and Karthik start liking and falling for one another. Will Radha and Karthik be able to reunite despite the opposition by their families? A complete package with sweet romance, mostly Indian couples taste in their courtship time before arranged marriage amidst the drama of quirky Indian families. The novel will make you laugh, smile and enjoy the riddling ends of episodes. The budding love, romance, jealousy, hopes, fights will take you to the heights of dopamine and keep you engaged during the whole read.

The Anonymous

- By Nidhi Kukreja
When she read the letter written with blood, she gasped in horror. The protagonist Natasha, was a content editor by profession and was living a peaceful life in the suburbs. However, an unsolicited event made her a nycophobic — someone suffering from post-traumatic stress. And while

recovering from her trauma, she started receiving creepy letters from a stalker turning her into an 'avenging angel' mode. Nevertheless, her life again changed completely when she met Siddharth in a hospital. He was a fun-loving handsome man whose life was a perfect mess around alcohol, drugs, and one-night stands. But after meeting Natasha, he developed captivating interest for her. Will Siddharth be able to catch up or will it rip them apart?

The Unsolved Case of an Indian Woman

- By Puneeth JS
The Unsolved Case of an Indian Woman, a psychological thriller, is a journey of a protagonist — Miss Tandel, a 40-year-old advocate, who bravely investigates crimes, strives against corruption, and hinders women harassment. The first half of the book creates various puzzle pieces, and as the book progresses, these puzzles fall in place. With more than a year of research, it has turned out to be a distinct blend of mystery, emotions and facts. The book portrays the sensitive topics of society, especially regarding Daman and Gujarat. (IANSLife)

'No solution with Pak round the corner'

Author-journalist Prem Prakash's book Reporting India: My Seventy-Year Journey as a Journalist was launched by External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar in December 2020. From Pakistan to Jawaharlal Nehru, the veteran journalist spoke on a range of issues in the course of the conversation during the launch. IBNS-TWF correspondent Souvik Ghosh brings excerpts

Tell us about your experience of going to East Pakistan covering the Indo-Pak war.

I had to go to East Pakistan, so I did it. What we were hearing then and some reporters filing reports in Calcutta were hearsay. But if one had to know what was happening, he had to get inside (ground zero). Now I often wonder whether I had realised or not that I had a very young family when I was entering. I could have been arrested by the Pakistan Army and shot dead. But I did it. I had gone to Jessore Railway Station to ensure that the world knew that I had been to the location. I did that and was lucky to come back.

You have lamented in the book that the battle was won on the field but was lost in the negotiating table. Why did that happen despite having a strong government and shrewd politicians back in India?

I often wonder whether we Indians as a race are very sympathetic or friendly. We have always been emotional even towards the Chinese (China). We had captured Haji Pir with great sacrifice. Somewhere I have felt that we lost out in the game of brinkmanship on many occasions.

Every Prime Minister of India thinks in the initial years of his or her term that the Pakistan issue can be resolved but thinks completely otherwise towards the end. What is it that no Prime Minister could do to resolve the issue?

I wonder whether we are naive, emotional or good people. I don't think this can work out. Once Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq became the Prime Minister of Pakistan, the country had totally

changed and moved towards an Islamic extremism. I don't want to be totally pessimistic but I don't think there is a solution with Pakistan round the corner.

Can you tell us in a nutshell about Nehru's legacy?

The biggest legacy is democracy. He saw us as a nation through three General Elections which left India's people with the habit of going into polls and electing a government. That's the biggest legacy which he enjoyed. He was always present in Parliament and he used to interact so much with the rest, media. He was the only Prime Minister to say that the free press was better than a controlled press. I personally feel it's the legacy given to us by him.

We also find criticisms of Nehru. How do you look at him in a balanced way?

Even now I would say that he did a lot of hard work for India. Remember we never made anything (before Nehru). Every penny that India had was spent on building infrastructure, new plants, education. We have got the results of all those investments. He didn't expect a war with China because he had felt the world had seen so much warfare that no nation would solve their political programmes with wars.

Therefore he neglected the Army but in the 20 months he had lived after the war (Indo-Sino war), he had built the Indian Army from 250,000 to half-a-million. He had rearmed the Indian Army. He was concerned about Pakistan which was then fully-weaponized by America. The Americans were no friend of ours at that time. (IBNS-TWF)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, January 10, 2021

Jupiter square Uranus on your solar return chart and it will give mixed results for the whole year ahead. You will have to struggle hard in connection with your business/job. You will commit mistake if you trust anyone blindly, especially your close associates. If you are planning to sign some business agreement, reconsider your decision. Take investment decisions wisely. Financial position will remain normal but need to control your expenses. Your bosses will expect a lot from you. The health of parents/elders will be some concern. You will share good bonding with your mate/spouse. Everyone will respect you for your cooperative and supportive nature. It is a good year for those in love. Love marriage is indicated. You will support your friends, and help them when they need it most. Auspicious functions will keep taking place.

Artes: (March 21 - April 20)

It is time to concentrate on your career prospects and professional skills as a promotion or lucrative business opportunity is likely to emerge consequent to your efforts. You successfully perform tasks that involve cooperation and team harmony. Your tendency to control your life through some form of manipulation is strong. This is a phase that highlights romance and love in your family life. You may also experience some tangles in your close personal relationships. You're at your best when you are showing the world your practical, competent, and responsible side.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

You would adapt to new circumstances with ease opening yourself to positive events. You are able to find creative solutions to problems now. You put in a lot of effort and find this has established a strong professional base and it brings in desired and even unexpected gains. Money issues pop up now-the discovery of a way to increase your income, an unexpected gift or reward, or a brief financial crisis that motivates you to find new ways to make money is possible.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

You may especially enjoy experiencing different cultures and styles. Your ideas and goals are higher than usual, teaching and mentoring may be part of the whole picture. Your cultural and spiritual awareness increases. You are ready to make new beginnings and invest in new business and relationships. It is a good time to put your needs first, but doing so with respect for others will take you further. Whether you can succeed as a leader is tested right now. Spending time in solitude among natural surroundings is therapeutic.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

You are presented with an opportunity to get rid of what doesn't work in your life, while also discovering what does. You are highly motivated to make money and this enhances quite a bit of energy for new moneymaking projects. You are sorting through the experiences of the last several months, separating the worthwhile from the worthless. You may be drawn into some form of service that will bring deep personal satisfaction. At this time, you seek perfection and distinction in your work and this quality takes you to a more responsible position.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

You are more aware than before of your mental and physical health, daily routine, everyday working life, and your working methods. Now is the time to realize your own potential through your significant other. You focus on balancing your personal interests and objectives with your social life, or with those of a partner. Circumstances are such that your diplomacy skills are required. Your popularity is increasing, and is reinforced by your own ability to cooperate and harmonize. You would be able to make an impact on people with innovative ideas and work.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

You would be successful in creative writing and in the entertainment industry. Your ego and pride are tied up in how you relate to others now. This may be an especially busy time for people who consult or work with clients one-on-one. Relationships are dynamic-full of conflicts and resolutions. You tend to take things quite personally now, and something that

someone says or does now can easily rile you. Extra care should be exercised when it comes to work, health matters, and daily routines.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

It would be wise to be especially clear when it comes to communicating with co-workers. Re-thinking the suitability of your job is possible now, but you should avoid jumping to any premature decisions. Take this time to re-examine issues rather than communicating about them prematurely. A positive and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining the cooperation of important people. You move on the path of betterment in terms of better financial stability, emotional and mental satisfaction and intellectual growth.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

A new set-up in an existing relation or a new love affair may be formed. Your professional life brings rewards and recognition now. You are working hard and inclined towards more detailed work. An opportunity to expand business arrives now. Increased connections and experiences come into the picture. This is a period of growth as well as some form of blossoming. This is a very fortunate time to arrange get-togethers, parties and events. Increased public recognition and professional success characterizes this week. You would become more particular about your health and diet.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

This time takes some kind of pressure on professional and personal aspects. You may begin to take on more responsibilities on the job or in another capacity. Your job could become rather tedious or boring, or working conditions may be tiring and frustrating. You find yourself more accountable than ever when it comes to your work and output. You may have to draw some boundaries with friends and the demands placed on you. You would attach yourself to unusual, more spiritual activities. This is an excellent period for starting new regimens to improve your health and well being, such as regular exercise and a more structured and productive use of your time.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

It would be wiser to face difficult people and situations rather than escape, as there would be victory and success in professional ventures. Don't take the one you love for granted but show your love and appreciation. Financial transactions and professional projects go ahead smoothly with goodwill and they would be profitable. Your professional skills wisdom and craft is appreciated and fresh opportunities for expansion are made available to you. Personal relationships gain a romantic and exciting quality. Business projects and associations are opening up and widening your horizons so you need to think expansively from now onwards.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

You would achieve a lot in business and professional aspects by combining creativity and practicality. You take on a more mature role in the family and in personal situations by taking on extra responsibility and giving direction. You can expect seniors to support you and stand up for you in tough situations. You can trust your intuition about people and situations when called upon to mediate in conflicts and collaborations. A new work opportunity can change the way you work and relate with people professionally. How willing you are to experiment and explore new approaches will determine your success at this time.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

This is a favorable phase for people in sports, competition, game shows and other related fields. You have been more determined and hard working and this brings fulfillment of desires particularly in competitive examinations. This is a good time to be with a friend or get associated with a group with whom you can share your own ideas and thoughts. Communications from overseas are hopeful and exciting as business opportunities are extended to you. You are physically energetic and enjoy the feeling of well being and confidence.

Career with Young People



By Ranjan K Baruah

Most of us who are reading this article are young people. Being students in colleges or universities or in schools we are engaged in different activities. There are few days which are focussed for young people like national youth day and international youth day. In India, 12th January is observed as Youth Day. I am sure that few of us are engaged in different activities inside the campus like being part of the National Service Scheme or National Cadet Corps or Junior Red Cross or Scouts and Guides. Apart from being part of a different voluntary society we can also take up our career with young people.

Are you passionate about helping young people to develop good character and life skills that will help them succeed in their life? Then, you may consider a career in youth development. Well, let us understand scopes and opportunities related to youth development in India and abroad. There are currently more than 1 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24 in the world. This is the largest youth population ever. However, more than half of all children and adolescents aged 6-14 lack basic reading and maths skills, despite the fact that the majority of them are attending school.

India is one of the youngest nations in the world and is expected to have a very favourable demographic profile in the near future. This is a great opportunity as well as a challenge for all of us. Transforming edu-

cation is possible when young people take up their responsibility and they are not deprived of their rights. Apart from government, youth led organisations or organisations working for youth development may contribute positively for achieving targets of SDGs.

Professionals working in youth development do activities like Research, create, teach, lead, and support programs aimed at improving the lives of young adults, provide a safe and positive environment in which classes or activities are held, teach classes and facilitate workshops, lead different activities, facilitate support groups, organize field trips and exposure programmes, etc. After the pandemic scopes have increased as many professionals have to be engaged in the post COVID 19 activities with students and youth to boost up their confidence level in different areas of the country.

Job titles commonly held by youth development professionals are youth development specialist, youth development program coordinator, youth development professional, youth development counsellor, program manager, program coordinator, program director, youth director, outreach director, etc. One may study courses like Master of Social Work or Development Studies. There are courses like youth development in India and abroad. Rajiv Gandhi National Institute of Youth Development offers courses like M.A. Social Work (Youth and Community Development). Experienced persons may take up short term courses

offered by specialised agencies on youth development.

Career prospects are in different avenues like in government projects and departments like youth development; professional practice in NGOs and INGOs; scope for advanced studies in youth in India and abroad, teaching in the field of youth studies, training and consultancy services, scope for development and practice-orientated research, etc. Professionals may explore innovative practices/modules for addressing youth issues and to ensure social inclusion and justice and they may also establish organizations in the area of youth development.

12th January is observed as National Youth Day and this kind of event brings more opportunities for people working in the field of youth development. Though there are courses but there are individuals who have done remarkable work without much formal degree. Passion is must and important if anyone wants to work with young people. Apart from qualifications like post graduation it is important to have all required employability skills to excel in the field of youth development. Though some one may work without a very formal degree, it is advantageous to have degrees and academic qualifications as the challenges of employability have increased.

(The author is a career mentor, skill trainer, motivational speaker and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkranjn@gmail.com for any career related queries)

*"Coming together is a beginning;
keeping together is progress; working
together is success."*

— Edward Everett Hale

The Shillong Times

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Taming of Covid-19

THE countdown for the much awaited Covid-19 vaccination programme in India – a nation of more than 1.30 billion inhabitants and the second most-affected after the US in global infection tally, has begun. With Prime Minister Modi giving his final nod for the programme to start on Saturday, January 16, preparations are near-complete across states. The PM will launch the vaccination drive in two hospitals in Karnataka as some three crore health-care workers and allied staff on Covid-duty will be the first to line up for the jabs, followed by those above age 50 and people with co-morbidity conditions. Two vaccines are in the forefront now, Covishield and Covaxin. The death of a volunteer in Bhopal in phase-three trials of Covaxin by BharatBiotech on December 21 came as a dampener, but the authorities have stressed that the death occurred due to cardio respiratory failure "not linked to the vaccine jab." While the vaccination drive has begun in the West, overall, no health complication thereof has been reported. Experts in the medical field vouch for the safety of the vaccines produced both in India and outside too.

A silver lining in the grim Covid-19 scenario is the good performance by Indian pharma firms to come up with vaccines, and their efforts have won global acclaim and a pat from the WHO too. While the arrival of a new Covid-19 strain from the UK caused some concern in the past couple of weeks, the overall Covid scenario in the country remains well under control. More and more of the activities are getting resumed. Over 1,50,000 deaths were reported so far from this pandemic in India, where less than one per cent of the population was infected by the time the vaccine jab season has arrived. Expectations are that the situation could be mostly neutralized by May this year. The sense of optimism is however tempered with the risks that lie ahead. A relief is that the new strains too can be kept out of harm's way by the vaccines that are ready for Covid-19. Yet, there are the imponderables. Studies are under way about the long-term risk factors for the Covid-infected. Time alone can say if things are as simple as we presume. Lots of people who recovered from the Covid-19 infection have developed sleep difficulties; and more have suffered from fatigue and muscle weakness, as a study in Wuhan, where the virus made its initial hits showed. This, however, is time to hope for the best and make a success out of the vaccination programme.

MDA Govt demolishing the foundation of matrilineal social system

By H H Mohrmen

The decision of the MDA government to permit the issuance of Scheduled Tribe certificates to tribal children in the state who follow the patrilineal/patriarchal family system is going to have an irreparable damage to the culture and society of the Hynñew Trep community. This is no different from removing a keystone from the wall which will ultimately lead to its collapse. The Government has failed to realise that the matrilineal family system is not just children taking their mother's surname and lineage, but it in fact is intricately linked to culture and tradition of the Hynñew Trep, Hynñew Skum society. The move made by the state government has also undermined the powers and functions of the Autonomous District Councils in the state and it has deliberately encroached into the Councils' subject.

People are talking about identity, but the pertinent question is what makes the Hynñew Trep people different? Or what is the identity of the Jaidbynriew? What exactly do we mean when we talk about the identity of the Jaidbynriew? The Hynñew Trep people are different from other communities because of their unique culture and the family lineage system is a distinct aspect of its culture. The lineage system that people adopted is not only about children taking the mother's surname but it is the foundation of the culture of the community. The entire culture and tradition of the Hynñew Trep revolves around the lineage system and matrilineal system is in fact what makes the culture of the people unique. The clan system which is the bedrock of the society rests on the foundation of matrilineal system and there wouldn't be any clan without the 'Iawbei' of the primal mother of the clan.

Let us try to examine elements that were alleged to be adverse to the progress of the jaidbynriew if we continue with the matrilineal system. The number one reason that is trotted out as a major cause of concern is the high number of single mother families (ka longing ba tang ka kmie/ka kmie ba hap ri

khunrei) in the community. And without any data to support that, it was also alleged that the increase in number of fatherless children was because of rampant inter-marriages where Hynñew Trep female enter into inter-racial marriages with men from other races. The other concern raised was that women have the freedom to choose their life partners so it promotes inter-racial marriages (shongkha khleh) which ultimately leads to single mother parents. The fact is that the issue of high numbers of single mothers cannot be blamed on others because there are high divorce/abandonments even if the marriage is among two tribals. The freedom that the females of the society enjoy is also blamed as the factor which leads to the weaker section of the society to have a loose character, which again is an unfounded allegation.

It is also alleged that the matrilineal system demeans the prestige of the male members of the family. It was said that men have no say in the affairs of the family because in it is the female members who rule the roost. In the matrilineal system the role of 'ukhi' or the maternal uncle is very significant but this has not been taken into consideration. The problem is because the matrilineal family is criticised using the lenses of patriarchy. The Hynñew Trep family system is a unique system where the role of the male and female members are clearly defined.

It is alleged that the family system is not suitable for business because the inheritance is from the mother to the daughter, not the father to the son. Hence this does not augur well for the success of any business and this is detrimental to family business. But in a true matrilineal system the inheritance is not only from the mother to the daughter but the status of the head of the family descends from the uncle to the nephew. Moreover can it be concluded that only Khasi Pnar or those who follow matrilineal family system fail in their businesses and other communities have hundred percent successes in their businesses because they

follow patriarchy?

Now let us try to examine what are the traditions which are going to be affected by changing the lineage system? Or how is this going to affect the jaidbynriew? As mentioned it destroys the foundation of the society, the very essence of the 'tip kur tip kha' is obliterated as the 'Kha' will become the 'Kur' and there are no Kur anymore. The question is whether the Kur can become the Kha or are we going to do away with the Kur and the Kha elements of the society?

And if we are going to do away with the matrilineal system, then the mawshyieng/mooty/leif moo tymoh or the repository of the deceased person's charred bones which is based on matrilineal system and the bones of those of the same clan are interred in the same ossuary will become redundant. In culture and tradition of the Khasi Pnar, the Kha and the Kur have their own respective roles to play in every aspects of the society. This will become obsolete in the family which follows the patriarchal system.

The allegation that the increasing numbers of single parent families are because there is something wrong in the family system of the society is unfounded. Divorce is an integral part of the society, as there is a tradition in place which allows divorce like 'pynleit san shyieng, pynleit kurim, e them or e chipiah'. The idea that marriage should be 'until death do us apart' is a modern idea which is a western Christian influence on the tribal institutions of marriages. Even in the generation of our grandmothers divorce is not an uncommon practice. For instance I have two grandmothers and both of them have different fathers.

Now the question is whether the patriarchal family system is a solution? Is patriarchal system a perfect system? If the community decides to adapt patriarchy our model will be the western patriarchal family system. With large Christian population, we are not only influenced by western culture but western

patriarchal family systems with high divorce rates will be our natural inclination. At the end of the day if we adopt patriarchy we will be no different from the people of the West and our apprehension about the high divorce rate is unfounded.

In fact if people are not satisfied with the matrilineal system the tradition is so rich that it even allows children of Khasi Pnar men who marry non-Hynñew Trep to become part of the tribe using 'Tangjait' tradition. The alternative is men who do not wish their children to take their wife's surname can also opt for 'tangjait' and start a new clan which can by tradition be recognised as a new clan.

The truth is that the matrilineal system did not fail us; it is we who have failed the system by adopting the foreign culture which is not in sync with the tradition. The reason is also the lack of understanding of the profound system which has survived the test of time. The question that begs the answer is, how can ILP protect the jaidbynriew, or what is the need of introducing ILP, when the MDA government has destroyed its very foundation? What is there to protect if the very essence of the jaidbynriew is destroyed? What is Khasi Pnar without matrilineal family system? Or what is left of the Hynñew Trep if we take away the matrilineal family system? Almost all Khasi Pnar have their own Seng Kur hence the question arises as to what is the use of the Seng Kur if the matrilineal family system is done away with? Will these Seng Kur permit children of male members of the clan to take the clan's name? If so will they become Kur or Kha to the children?

How can the regional parties which are part of the MDA government allow this to happen? How can regional parties which claim to protect the jaidbynriew, which also means the culture and tradition of the people, support such a move? It looks like the regional parties have lost their moorings and are only interested in grabbing and remaining in power only.

Email: hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

The Indians in Trump's seditious war

By Vappala Balachandran

Vincent Xavier Palathingal, a businessman from Kerala, now living in the United States, has attracted a lot of attention in our media. He was noticed waving an Indian flag at the Trump rally in Washington DC on January 6 which turned violent as it attacked the Capitol building, resulting in deaths.

He told our media that he had migrated to the US in 1992 after his education in the Government Engineering College, Thrissur. He claims to be a member of the State Central Committee of the Republican Party in Virginia and had gone to attend the Trump rally to protest against a 'stolen election'. He added that he was formerly a Democrat and had voted for Barack Obama twice.

Vincent claimed that a few delinquents had infiltrated the otherwise peaceful rally and committed acts of violence. He told a Malayalam news channel that the lawbreakers appeared to him to be from the left wing ANTIFA (Anti-Fascist and Anti-Racist Front) or BLM (Black Lives Matter). This was the fifth time he had attended Trump's rallies and the first one which ended in violence. Trump had always blamed ANTIFA for violence during the "Black Lives Matter" demonstrations.

In any case the US Justice Department is probing the incident in cooperation with the Capitol Police who would no doubt investigate the claims made by Vincent too. Latest reports from the US indicate that the man with a painted face with "Viking" horns, whose face was beamed all over the world was identified as Jake Angeli from Arizona, a regular Trump supporter belonging to the Far Right wing "QAnon".

However, the purpose of this piece is not to look into the incident at Capitol Hill but to offer a retrospective of the political activities of Indian Americans based on my personal experience in the US and how it transformed from the original bipartisan movement into a community deeply divided on religious lines.

The Indian diaspora in the US was politically active during the 1920s-30s under the leadership of Taraknath Das, Har Dayal, Mubarak Ali Khan and J.J. Singh and many others. Their canvassing efforts paved the way for the election of Dalip Singh Saund, the only Indian to be a part of the US Congress (1957-63) till the 1990s. However, it was an epic struggle as all immigration was stopped during the Second World War.

In 1946 the Luce-Cellar Act 1946 allowed Indians to be considered as a special category for immigration. This was due to the bipartisan campaigning with Congressmen by J.J. Singh, President of the India League. Others who supported this legislation were famous scientist Albert Einstein, noted writer Pearl S. Buck, and former California governor Upton Sinclair.

However, the 1946 law re-introduced the quota system established under a 1924 Act. It was heavily in favour of Northern and Western Europe. Notwithstanding this limitation, the 1946 law benefited 3,000 Indians already living in the US, and help them get naturalised. The McCarran-Walter Act, also called The Immigration & Nationality Act, passed in 1952, continued quota-based immigration. Asian countries were given a meagre quota of 100 visas each per

year. The real benefits occurred under the presidency of Lyndon Johnson when the 1965 Immigration & Naturalization Act (Hart-Cellar Act) gave preference to reuniting immigrant families after abolishing the quota system based on national origin. However, the arrival of a large number of South Asian families led to a peculiar cloistered style of living, confining their activities around temples or mosques and celebrating South Asian festivals. This was the period of the ABCD (American Born Confused Desi) syndrome. The growing Indian community remained only a fringe group in national politics since they made no attempts to integrate into the American mainstream by taking part in the political process.

It was Dr. Joy Cherian, a former Youth Congress activist and his colleagues like Krishna Srinivasa, Gopal Bashist, Dinesh Patel, Dr. Suresh Prabhu, Swadesh Chatterjee and many others belonging to the Republican and Democratic parties who exhorted Indian Americans to join American political activities in the 1980s. They replicated the tactics of the Jewish bipartisan lobby group American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) founded by Tom Dine in 1963 to build constituency pressure on American Congressmen to look after the interests of Israel. In a similar way the bipartisan Indian American leadership established the Indian-American Forum for Political Education (IAFPE) in 1983 to further the interests of India.

Other Indian American activists like Dr. Thomas Abraham and Inder Singh widened the ambit of Indian Americansto several countries like Fiji, Guyana, Surinam etc which were the destinations of old Indian indentured labour. They did so by establishing a global Indian diaspora platform named Global Organization of Indian Origin (GOPIO) in 1989. The visibility of the Indian diaspora improved. All of them were secular, bipartisan groups belonging to all religions and communities.

Unfortunately, the first blow to the bipartisan movement of the Indian American Community was given by, of all persons, senior Congress leader the late Siddhartha Shankar Ray as Indian Ambassador to America. In 1993 he excluded the "Overseas Friends of BJP" from the "1893 Vivekananda Chicago Speech Centenary Celebrations" in America, with the bureaucratic reasoning that it was strictly an official programme of the Indian government. Since then, the BJP segment of Indian Americans, who were seen taking an active part in all the bipartisan programmes of the Indian American organisations earlier, started staying away.

This schismatic trend was reinforced after Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed power in 2014. Only pro-BJP or pro-RSS Indian Americans were involved in Prime Ministerial and high-level visits. Others were not invited. Just prior to the 2016 American Elections, a new organisation named "Hindus for Trump" came on the scene. The old bipartisan group felt left out. In the process, the Indian lobbying power in the US has suffered to Pakistan's advantage because of the exclusion of non-Hindus from the mainstream of Indian American activities.

(The writer is a former Special Secretary, Cabinet Secretariat) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (e-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org)

TO THE EDITOR

Umiam bridge, a serious concern now

Editor,
An old man cannot carry a heavy load. If we forcefully and continuously make him carry the heavy weight, he will stumble and fall. He may even die. Similar is the case with the Umiam bridge now. Probably built in the early 60s with specified carrying capacity the bridge is now in a dilapidated condition. With the excessive rise in traffic to commensurate with the need of the ever-expanding Shillong town, the alarm bell has already been ringing. Allowing heavy trucks, sometimes with 18-wheels, to pass through this bridge day-in-day out is very risky in view of the condition and its expiry time period. Many concerned citizens and media have raised the security and risk factors in various platforms. I only wonder why this siren of danger is not audible to our concerned authorities.

The MLA from Umroi, George B. Lyngdoh had brought this concern to the attention of the House in the last Autumn Session. He cautioned -- "the entire state will be dragged into darkness. Who will take responsibility?" The MLA is practically right. All should stand with him. Just imagine and evaluate the likely situation of Shillong town if ever a major mishap happens.

Heaven forbid! It will surely plunge our entire Meghalaya into darkness. Not just the "physical" darkness due to the absence of light but it will cripple the total economy of the state and much more. The tremors and jolts will be felt in Mizoram, Tripura and Silchar too. The immediate victim of the tragedy will be the adjoining Ri-Bhoi and downstream areas. Many lives might be lost. The innumerable households might be washed away by the water force, even affecting the topographical make-up. We need to know here that there is a vast difference between the destruction due to the collapse of a normal bridge and a water retaining bridge/dam.

Moreover, what economically viable alternative do we have that we can keep dilly-dallying? None at all! This Umiam Bridge is like an esophagus to this state. Meghalaya is in bloom only because this "one bridge" is functional. There should not be any further delay in constructing/repairing the bridge. Concerned citizens should now put pressure upon the authorities to take this issue with utmost seriousness. Meanwhile, some strict restrictions must be in place to control the movement of heavy vehicles. We cannot afford to water down this risk and security factors any longer. Disaster waits for no one.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

US Presidential Election 2020

Editor,

In a statement released by the White House shortly after Joe Biden was certified by Congress as the winner of the 2020 presidential election, Donald Trump, after his devilish actions failed, was compelled to state that there would be a peaceful transition of power on January 20 next. After free and fair general elections held in the United States, one of the oldest democracies of the world, Trump had been repeatedly accusing that the November 2020 presidential elections were plagued by fraud. His claim of fraud was denied even by Republican officials including his former attorney general and Georgia's election chief. Donald Trump's persistently brazen attempts to undermine the integrity of voting systems have also failed. Legal Courts of Law of various states and finally the Supreme Court have also rejected his fabricated and false charges of fraud in the elections.

Undaunted Trump continued to provoke and encourage his supporters to show up in force for protesting in connection with the Congressional vote scheduled for January 6, 2020 to affirm Joe Biden's election victory. The culmination of his sinister design came out in the open when on Wednesday Trump's supporters,

exhorted by the President to go to the Capitol and fight like hell against a stolen election, overran and occupied the building in an explosive confrontation that left a Capitol police officer and four others dead. Indulgence to such a heinous act of hooliganism by creating a goons-regiment by the Head of a state is unprecedented in the history of post Second World War.

After an extraordinary act of violence from a riotous mob forced U.S. legislators to evacuate the Capitol Building during the counting of the Electoral College votes in the presidential election, Congress voted to certify the results showing President-elect Joe Biden defeated President Trump.

Incited by Trump a frenzied riotous mob stormed and vandalized the Capitol and occupied the offices of the Capitol building which is the symbol of the citadel of democracy. This constitute a grave crime which deserves exemplary punishment. As a part of his legacy the product of the destructive forces that President Donald Trump has been nurturing and stirring for years, namely the angry mob laid a siege to the U.S. Capitol, occupied the House and Senate chambers making legislator run for cover. It culminated in the disruption of a democratic ritual that would formally end his unconstitutional bid to stay in power.

But the violence, which included gunshots fired in the Capitol resulting in five deaths, and an armed occupation of the Senate floor, was fostered by the man who swore an oath to protect the very democratic traditions that rioters tried to undo in his name. This act amounted to an attempted coup d'état incited by the President of the United States.

It is a shame that insurrection and instigation was initiated by a duly elected and reigning President unwilling to honor and respect the verdict of the electorate for a peaceful transfer of power to the President-elect with a thumping majority of votes by resorting to rowdy manners. A President of the United States during his tenure conspiring with mobs to bring down his own Government as has been done by Donald Trump is totally against the idea and concept of democracy for which the nation has stood for over two centuries. Donald Trump needs to be barred for life from contesting elections and the newly elected team of Joe Biden may consider options for impeachment of Donald Trump for his misdeeds and to nip in the bud the possibility of recurrence of such a gross and shameful episode with a devilish trump card for good!

Yours etc.,
Samares
Bandyopadhyay
Advocate, Kolkata
High Court,
Kolkata

Youth Centre sans young people

Editor,

Anyone who passes through Don Bosco Square would have noticed that the gates of a once bustling centre called Don Bosco Youth Centre (DBYC), once an open house for people of all walks of life to meet, interact, conduct programmes or even check the bulletin board for job openings, are now closed to the public. The DBYC used to be a recreation and games centre and was throbbing with life during the lifetime of late Fr. Celia. Now with a new administrator taking over, it appears that the rules have changed. The place is deserted with all the gates shut. This is ironic because the DBYC should be a crowd puller for various weekend or weekday programmes to allow young minds a creative space as Don Bosco himself would have wanted. The Salesians of Don Bosco cannot forget the principles on which their founder stood firm and that was to influence the youth in the right direction by giving them time and attention. Fr Celia was this and much more. He was a counselor and had time to listen to young people, including those in distress. The present disconnect goes against the tenets of the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB).

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin
Wankhar
Shillong-3

"The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership."

—Harvey S. Firestone

The Shillong Times

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Human development should be a priority

IT is a travesty that Health, Education, Power and Road Communication have never been the priority of pressure groups and hence not that of the government too. Reason being that successive governments in Meghalaya have never listed their priorities but have been pushed to cogitate on issues flagged by pressure groups — issues which are not necessarily representative of the views of a large majority of Meghalaya's citizenry. Public discourse in Meghalaya is minimal even while the impact of short-sighted policies is universal. Roads are the lifeline of the state and also impinge on the health outcomes of people in rural Meghalaya. Pregnant women continue to die due to the absence of healthcare facilities closer to their villages and their need to travel long distances to reach a hospital. This is the bane of Meghalaya's health care system. In 2018-19 the budget of Meghalaya stood at Rs 14,101 crore while Health was allocated only about 6.3% at Rs 852 crores.

The per capita expenditure on health in 2015-16 was Rs 2,223, less than half of other smaller NE states like Arunachal Pradesh Mizoram etc. In 2018-19, almost 33 percent of staff nurse positions and 25 percent of general physician positions were vacant. These include the one-third of Medical Officer posts that were unfilled in PHCs. Almost 60 percent of specialist posts are vacant, which include 42 percent vacancies in District Hospitals. The interminable delay in starting a medical college that was envisaged at least 10 years ago has added to the shortage of specialists as there are no opportunities for higher education and continuing medical education.

As far as Education is concerned the budget allocation in 2018-19 was 6.87% at Rs 969.64. Much of the money goes into salaries and very little in educational innovation and smart classrooms. Ironically, the teachers employed under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan which is intended to bring every child to school are not paid regularly. There is a huge gap between resources needed for the educational sector and what's available. This gap will show up in educational outcomes in Meghalaya and has already done so if we go by the latest SSLC results where some schools particularly in Garo Hills got zero pass percentage. This led to demand for closure of such schools. But as usual the noise over this issue receded with time.

Roads in rural Meghalaya in all the districts are in very poor shape and even when constructed are not designed to last beyond one monsoon season and that is because the defect liability burden on the contractor is 365 days (one year). This means that if a road is eroded by rain water due to its poor quality after one year of its completion the contractor bears no liability.

It is high time that Meghalaya gets its act together and lists out its priorities and these should be in the area of human development and not just infrastructure creation.

My sojourns: Stray thoughts

By Albert Thyrniang

My two week's sojourn over Christmas and New Year was also to catch up with friends and interact with people besides visiting a couple of exquisite local tourist locations. The following paragraphs are a fruit of the mesmerising stopover in addition to earlier experiences. For most parts, except for the Facebook streams and Whatsapp messages whenever and wherever there was network service, mainstream news was largely off the routine. On the only day I opened my email I received New Year wishes from a senior and outspoken journalist who stated that in the society there are many silent dissenters who dare not to take a stand.

In my encounters with people I did find dissenters, the majority of whom have to unjustly suffer silently while others have begun to assert themselves. Due to obvious reasons instances can't be specific on this page. One of the common complaints is against grassroots leaders like the Rangbah shnong who tend to act arbitrarily. Due to lack of education, the inability to identify available means and fear of repercussions victims don't dare to question the injustice meted out. However, time is changing. A family, for example, decided to call the media to expose the undesired action of a headman. Many have begun to express their dissent in Whatsapp groups against arbitrary decisions of leaders.

Criticism against religious leaders is another uncommon murmur. Moans include their disapproved and 'objectionable' lifestyle, secretive financial management and even suspicious misuse of funds. Credibility of religious leaders is found wanting and financial management is not above board, according to many.

A constant disquiet has been about the 'bishopless' Nongstoin diocese. Ever since November 2016 when the first bishop, Rev. Victor Lyngdoh was transferred to Jowai, the 2006 created diocese has been without a bishop. After more than four years Rome has not been able to choose a new 'shepherd'. Common people simply wonder in their conversation but those-in-the-know do identify the reasons. There are too many candidates who see themselves assuming the coveted office. If anyone other than their own is appointed the innocent person is rejected. It is absolute narrow-mindedness with no universal outlook contrary to their faith. The ordinary faithful has no issue but it is the clique of

clergy which is playing havoc. Now that the bishop of Jowai is expectedly headed to Shillong Archdiocese the more complicated 14 year seat of the church in Jaintia Hills will be without a successor for a long time. As self-centric and extreme exclusive attitude of clergymen is unlikely to change, a few have suggested the three dioceses be amalgamated into one as they were prior to 2006.

Inter denominational live-in relationships and marriages are found to be prevalent. Couples try to pull the other to their side. Parents and family members come in 'ordering' their boy or girl not to follow the other. Relatives and friends follow up with advice to 'remain firm'. In many cases things are settled sooner or later but in some cases couples remain unmarried for years together hoping the other will relent. This is not an ideal situation for children. The realistic counsel is to go for mixed marriage each respecting the other. Children too, when they attain the age of reason, can have the freedom to follow their heart.

Staying with religion this writer did meet a person who expressed his desire to return to the Khasi faith. When asked he simply said he wishes to preserve the religious beliefs of the forefathers. When pressed again whether the Khasi religion is superior to Christianity or Islam or other religions he ducked the question. Should one reconvert just to keep the religious and social practices of fore-parents alive?

Letters have appeared in this daily stating that adherents of indigenous religions, namely, Niam Tynrai (in Khasi Hills), Niamtrek (in Jaintia Hills) and Songsarek (in Garo Hills) are organising themselves to preserve and conserve their traditional religion against the onslaught of Christianity. They have every right to do so. If a revival is happening it is welcome. However, the view of a letter writer is quite worrisome. According to him/her only those who belong to Niam Khasi are pure Khasis. Christians are not unless they do a 'ghar wapsi'. This is an extremist view. When closely examined it is no different from fanatical Christians who are convinced that Jesus Christ is the only saviour or fundamental Muslims who declare that Islam is the best religion. It is essentially the same as those who assert that 'all Indians should be Hindus'.

Religion does not define nationality, tribal and ethnic identity. If it does we are venturing into dangerous territories. The English were

once not Christians. They were 'pagans'. Are the present day English not pure English? Should they re-adopt the polytheistic and heterogeneous beliefs and cultic practices to be considered as pure English? The same applies to the Germans, the French, the Italians, the Spaniards and all people in all the continents, the Americans, Europeans, the Asians, the Australians and the Africans. Very few have remained in their original religions. As a matter of fact the vast majority have accepted Christianity, Islam, Buddhism et cetera. Should they all go back to their origins to be pure again?

Indigenous communities all over the globe have largely left the practices of their ancestors. The circumstances might not have been ideal. Voluntary conversion might have been absent. The fact remains that natives of North and South America, Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa no longer adhere to the practices prior to the advent of Christianity or Islam or Buddhism. Should the thousands of indigenous religious ways of life be restored to regain ones' true identity?

Religion is not the only influencer. The Khasis, as with the case of every community, have been influenced not only by religion. It is not only the way we worship that has changed. The way we live has changed beyond recognition. Our dresses our attitudes, our houses no longer huts, our food are not of the ancestors, our entertainments and amusements are not the same, the means of movements and communication are new and even the way we celebrate traditional festivals have altered. Religious, social and cultural practices have undergone a change. Even those who still follow indigenous religions have been impacted by modernity and education. It is quite sure the way they worship and the manner they conduct ceremonies have varied. Hence there is purity left. Therefore, there is no difference between a Khasi Christians, a Khasi Muslim, a Khasi Hindu or a Khasi Niam Khasi. All are equal. There is no one more or less pure than the other. All are Khasis irrespective of religious affiliation or else we have to go back to pre-British era. Evolution will continue to make its way whether we want it or not.

The other day the Social Welfare Minister, Kyrmen Shylla had to incur flak for seemingly notifying that the Deputy Commissioners (DCs) in Khasi Hills should issue Schedule Tribe (ST) certificates to individuals who have taken their father's surname. One is aware that as per the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Khasi Social Custom Offline) Act, 1997 Khasis who carry their father's clan name might not be entitled to be certified a Scheduled Tribe. In the act itself there are descriptions like 'non-Khasi father', 'non-Khasi mother', 'Rap-ying or', 'adopting Khasi person', 'Tang Jai' etc. So the point is few, perhaps no one, is a pure Khasi. If the act is applied retrospectively many would fail.

Last year I saw a video of one of Meghalaya's first politicians. He married an American woman. Did his children not inherit his surname? Why should his children be Khasis then and children who take their father's name today not Khasis? The pathetic road condition in West Khasi Hills and South West Khasi Hills face a constant curse from the people. The lifeline Nongstoin-Mawthabab road via Rangblang has remained dilapidated for more than 40 years. A few pictures and videos of the ever deteriorating road were posted on social media. The other day a photograph of the highly dilapidated stretch at Wah Kynthei made it to one of the pages in this newspaper. In 2016 there was a great opportunity when the National Highways Authority of India (NHA) sanctioned to convert it into a two-lane road. Work was about to commence. However, anti-development and short sighted pressure groups and the district council shattered the dreams of the people. They opposed the road instead of opposing only uranium mining.

On the last day of last year, in a public function graced by Mr. Renikton Lyngdoh Tongkhar, minister of Public Health Engineering Department (PHE) who is also the MLA of Mawkyrwat, through which the above-mentioned road runs, announced before a crowd that the government will soon call for tenders for all important roads demoting it into an intermediary road. An advocate who also attended another function confirmed that the Supreme Court has ordered the state government build the 'intermediary' Nongstoin-Mawthabab road. The question is when? The unconvinced public interprets the adjective 'soon' to be at least four years. The Nongstoin-Mawthabab road has been the subject of my lamentations for a number of times. Will it cease to provide materials for stray thoughts? Email: thalbert@rediffmail.com

The pandemic is also nature and environment related. Delhi is one of the most polluted cities in the world. And so is Beijing. But while Delhi has done nothing, Beijing had started a clean air initiative under the Carbon Utilization and Storage programme. Instead, Rs 20,000 crores is earmarked for the central vista project. The design is supposedly being Hindutva driven. And the urgency is to finish the project by 2025 to coincide with the centenary of the founding of the RSS. On top of that, the topmost priority of BJP ruled State Government in UP, MP is, 'Love Jihad', Gau Cabinet etc. Amidst regular cases of brutal rapes of women, safety of women has been satirized into having to wear a cow's head mask by women. Not to speak of how much has been done to address the problems of migrant workers. The economic downturn is at 23%.

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The writer has nevertheless factually enumerated the several positive actions taken by the central government during the pandemic. But that is the job of the government. Those elected are in the government out of their volition, so they better do the job expected of them. They are not doing anyone a favour. Platitudes like hailing Covid warriors is welcome but talk to the Covid warriors; they will say they need more monetary rewards than platitudes.

Coming to the State of Meghalaya and the Northeast, I am not aware of any law which is religion-centric yet. And by the way, singing, 'Amazing Grace' in the media to ward off the spell of Covid 19 is nothing compared to the chanting of 'Jai Sri Ram' in Parliament, which is a flagrant violation of the Constitution itself.

Yours etc.,
Rudi Warji,
Via email

High petrol, diesel prices are choking economy Time to bring all petro-products under GST

By Nantoo Banerjee

Nothing is more untrue and misleading than the official statement that the near record surge in current domestic petrol and diesel prices is linked with hardening crude oil prices in the international market. The retail prices of petrol and diesel have almost touched their peak levels reached in October, 2018. The prices were manipulated then, and now. The domestic petrol and diesel prices have nothing to do with world oil prices. Their prices are artificially jacked up by the government's high taxes and levies. They provide the easiest revenue source for both the central and state governments. The current crude oil prices in the international market vary between US\$47.12 per barrel for Mexican basket and \$53.93 for Brent crude. As of January 6, 2021, the global price of MARS US crude was hovering around \$51.03 per barrel. The price of OPEC basket was \$51.36. The average world crude oil price through the last week hovered around \$50.05 per barrel. The crude oil price did appreciate by only around five percent last week in anticipation that the newly discovered Covid vaccines may improve the global economic situation and raise the oil demand.

Contrast the current global crude oil prices with those prevailing in the middle of 2008 when the highest recorded price reached \$147.02 per barrel.

Domestic petrol and diesel prices don't dip sharply when global crude oil prices nosedive. They didn't drop when the global crude price temporarily crashed to \$19 a barrel, last year. The average closing price of crude oil was only \$39.68 per barrel through 2020. Why were Indian consumers still made to pay nearly Rs.70 for a litre of petrol and Rs.62 for diesel? On April 20, 2020, the price of West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude oil slumped into negative for the first time in history. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has had a catastrophic impact on the global oil and gas industry. Declining consumer demand and high levels of production threatened to exceed oil storage capacities, which resulted in the lowest ever oil prices in memory in April, 2020. Why they didn't have a visible impact on fuel prices in India, which recorded the worst economic decline of over 30 percent in the April-June, period? Prices were manipulated by taxes and levies instead of demand-supply situation in the market.

Obviously, the increase in petrol and diesel prices in India has little to do with the global crude oil price movements. Local prices are totally engineered by the government. High domestic retail prices are almost entirely due to extremely high levels of government levies. Such high domestic taxes may be good for the government, but they are choking the economy. Suffice it to say that high fuel prices lead to high transportation costs across the board. They impact all sectors of the economy — agricultural, industrial and services. Why are government economists, who used to be extremely critical of fuel subsidy for years, are now silent on tax terror on consumers? Sales tax and value-added tax on petro-

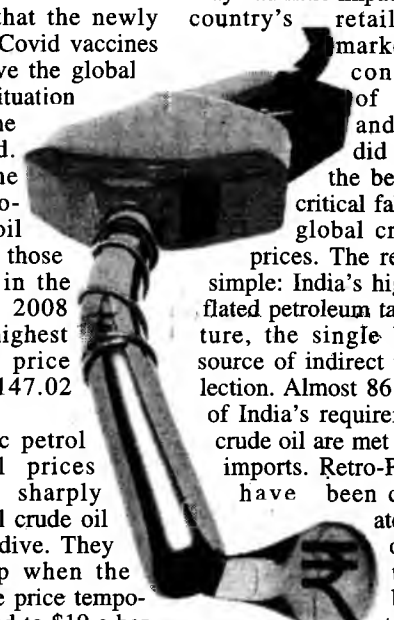
leum products also mean a huge income for state governments. In 2018-19, the total sales tax/VAT collected by states on petroleum products was Rs. 2.01 trillion, making up around 16 percent of the total Rs.12.61 trillion in tax revenue collected by state governments that year. In the first nine months of 2019-20, the total sales tax/VAT collected by state governments on petroleum products was Rs.1.44 trillion.

It is true that the global oil prices have been witnessing an increase since the arrival of Covid-19 vaccine, rekindling the hope of a return of economic normalcy and positive public sentiments around the globe. The stock markets too are partially up due to similar sentiments. However, it is difficult to digest the current atrocious behaviour of India's retail automotive fuel market. For instance, when crude oil prices had hit the bottom during last April due to severe restrictions on travel across the world, the petrol and diesel prices did not fall in India. A near total lockdown in India in April-May had little impact on the country's retail fuel market. The consumers of petrol and diesel did not get the benefit of the critical fall in the global crude oil prices. The reason is simple: India's highly inflated petroleum tax structure, the single biggest source of indirect tax collection. Almost 86 percent of India's requirement of crude oil are met through imports. Retro-Products have been deliberately kept outside the ambit of the goods and services tax.

Indian industry and consumers want the key petro-products under GST. However, this is unlikely to happen in the near future as all political parties at the helm of central and state governments are united against it. GST on petro-products will prevent their tax departments from freely tapping this sector to mop up large revenues at the cost of consumers.

Industry body Associated Chambers of Commerce (Assocham) wanted the GST to cover petrol and diesel in the greater interest of the economy. Assocham secretary general Deepak Sood says both the central and state governments have been over-dependent on petrol and diesel for revenue. "While this over-dependence needs to be brought down, there is a strong case for a national parity for the prices of the automobile fuel", Sood said. "Otherwise, the broader objective of a single market under the GST remains unfulfilled".

The components of taxes, levies and commissions on petrol and diesel in India cover some 60-70 percent of their retail prices at petrol pumps. This is absolutely atrocious and a major reason why India fares so poorly when it comes to its price competitiveness in the world market. It is choking the country's consumption and economic growth. Cheaper oil has positive impact on all macroeconomic parameters. It helps expand market and employment. The government, the single biggest consumer of petrol and diesel, will also be able to free up resources for welfare. (IPA Service)



TO THE EDITOR

Restoring degraded landscapes

Editor,
I read with interest the report captioned, "Meghalaya's barren landscapes poised for a big-time change," (ST Jan 7, 2021) where the Government of Meghalaya received funding from the World Bank to the tune of 48 million dollars (Rs 352.64 crores) to support the Meghalaya Community Led Landscape Management Project. This is a worthy initiative to restore and conserve the natural resources of Mawlyngot village and I presume of the surrounding areas. The news item also stated that an Auroville based NGO Sadhana Forests has been invited by the Government of Meghalaya "to help shape" to the Project. Sadhana Forests has done good work in wasteland reclamation and I personally welcome this collaboration. But I do not believe it will be a magic wand. I also like their holistic approach to afforestation schemes and to their emphasis on biodiversity and the use of local tree species. These are very important approaches that we must all support throughout the

project period. There is today a growing international acknowledgement that minimal disturbance to soils and ensuring that soils are very much covered are one of the most effective ways of controlling climate change. It is also hoped that Projects of this type will sensitise our communities in Meghalaya to the self-inflicting damage we are likely to bring to our future generations through biodiversity loss due to our charcoal, broom grass, mono crop plantations and coal mining business enterprises. These initiatives completely ignore the sacredness and wisdom of biodiversity and our ecological knowledge in our Mei Ramew culture and paradigm. COVID-19 has also reminded us that the loss of biodiversity is the source of pandemics and zoonotic diseases. Viruses because of this biodiversity loss are today jumping to us as their habitats. This Project must therefore be supported. BUT it must not be a purely technocratic or 'smart' initiative.

My only concern is that Sadhana Forests has no experience of working on indigenous lands and their specific indigenous worldview. Their first step must therefore be for the full team to learn the fundamentals of indigenous

ecology from local knowledge holders within the village and in Meghalaya. Forests are the result of generations of interactions between the local communities and nature. An outside group will need to understand how Khasis and Garos have evolved their complex land tenure, food and sacred forests systems in an effort to leave no one behind. An outside technical group and indeed our own modern experts, for example, may not fully appreciate when communities speak of 'per khlaw' (garden in the forest) because lands are not divided between agricultural and forest lands as we generally classify lands in our administrative systems. Project documents often ignore this phase of immersion for understanding local values and knowledge. Many projects naturally end up as "graveyards of well intentioned initiatives." We need to avoid this.

A well designed project often aims to 'empower' communities. This is not enough. We must aim to give communities an actual agency role so that they can have a culturally sensitive and self-determined development. NESFAS has learned that this is not an easy process and it

takes time. We have learned that project drivers (Govt staff, Sadhana, NESFAS etc) and informed communities must have the humility and willingness to co-create knowledge and initiatives as equal partners. This co-creation must be based on an intercultural approach of using traditional ecological knowledge and the experiences of contemporary science.

Yours etc.,
Phrang Roy
Chairperson, NESFAS
Via email

Modi Govt's wrong priorities

Editor,
Apropos the letter, "Jaundiced view of Shillong's personalities" (ST Jan 9, 2021) by H K Phawa, though I was not mentioned by name the insinuation was directed at me. I also appreciate H K Phawa for taking time to react to my "bird's eye view".

The writer appeared to have been peeved by my characterising of the central government's priority as being 'religion-centric'. Here is my substantiation. The pandemic is all about public health. Absence of adequate institutions of virology, immunology etc., in India is one of the reasons for the chaos

"Religion is excellent stuff for keeping common people quiet."

— Napoleon Bonaparte

The Shillong Times

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Court and farmers

THERE'S something unusual about the way the Supreme Court intervened in the seven-weeks-old farmer agitation seeking repeal of three laws that the central government has got cleared via Parliament. A division bench headed by Chief Justice SA Bobde has stayed implementation of the laws. A region-specific agitation by itself may not be sufficient reason for a court to stop implementation of a new law for the entire nation; more importantly, a long-awaited reform measure. A court can find fault with provisions in the law, but no fault as such has been cited while a batch of writ petitions challenge the constitutional validity of the laws. The court has set up a four-member panel to hold discussions with farmers and report to it so as to help it "mediate".

Two aspects cannot escape attention. One, the Congress party says this is a kind of hoodwinking and would only be of help to the government, as three of the four members in the panel are in "favour of the reforms". Farmers' unions themselves have not been enthused by the apex court's move. Two, the government introduced a twist by telling the court that Islamists as also Khalistani and Maoist moles have infiltrated the agitation. The court has rightly asked the attorney general to not talk in the air and instead produce proof.

The farmers' agitation since November 26 has affected life in the national capital and beyond due to the blockade they enforced in the border regions. Worse, the massing up of protesters over long periods at specific sites is a prescription for further spread of the Covid pandemic. This happens at a time when a new strain from the UK that can spread faster has reached Delhi. If the apex court could contribute to efforts at solving the issues raised by farmers, it would be of common good. Yet, issues as to how far the apex court can stretch its authority remains to be addressed. In a democratic set-up, the job of the executive and judiciary are well-demarcated.

The government, on its part, has said it is addressing issues raised by farmers by way of introducing amendments to the three laws in the next session of Parliament but is firm that the laws will not be repealed. Good sense must prevail on the part of farmers and the government so as to see an end to the agitation sooner than later. Reforms in the farm sector are a matter of urgency as lots of issues in the agriculture sector remain unresolved for long.

India: Farmers' movement challenges the increasing authoritarianism

By Gauri Sharma

Enraged Indian farmers are camping at the borders of national Capital Delhi for months in freezing cold after the Central Government passed three new farm bills ushering major agricultural reforms on 27th September 2020. Agrarian Community's insecurities are aptly reflected in phased demonstrations to show collective disapproval by sloganeering such as, 'Kisan Bacchao, Mandi Bacchao' (Save the Farmer, Save the traditional Market). More than forty days since the protests began from 23 November, the movement has already witnessed tragic demise of approximately eighty people. For now, the dogged refusal by the government to heed to their demands has brought the negotiations to a standstill reflected by a peaceful blockade of New Delhi, the Capital city by lakhs of farmers having set their camps on borders of the city in freezing cold. Despite seventh round-table talk for reconciliation ended in a deadlock, the near-siege by the protestors continues for their non-negotiable stance on repealing the new laws notably by the Farmer Unions of Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. The protestors are seen taking part in tractor rallies to show symbolic dissent as a rehearsal for a parallel march on the Republic day of India (26 January) that they aim to stage in Central Delhi. The movement under the name of, 'Delhi Chalo' (March to Delhi), stems from a fear of complete dismantling of Rural India's traditional agricultural foundation by possibility of corporate greed having an upper hand post the implementation of these reforms.

The new laws cast a doubt on the predictable disparity that entry of private Mandis, in fact anyone with a permanent account number (PAN) could create the uncertain future for traders and small marginalized farmers while competing with big players. This new entry into contract farming can prove to be a lethal blow with multinationals having the power to slap fines on farmers when unable to meet requirements like the famous Pepsi Corporate on few Gujrat based farmers, rendering them helpless. The new bills also allow businesses to stock agricultural produce, which was earlier discouraged for the fear of hoarding by corporates. However, in order to control the rising inflation, the Union Government either bans exports or allows cheap imports; either way the farmers face the brunt of it. By observing these fluctuating strict control exercised by the Union Government, one can observe how inconsistent the 'free market' rhetoric can be biased to the large corporations while neglecting the Indian Farmers.

The Agricultural sector's worrying contribution for the overall GDP of the nation displays a gross mismatch compared to the number of people dependent on it. The State's intention for a reform is right in order to change the status quo by stepping towards liberalized India but lacks collaborative delivery and space for political deliberation over a new structural

without State-tax impositions. The Ruling Party's decision to introduce these new ordinances was to streamline a largely unregulated sector with a promise of eliminating the need of middlemen and inviting private investment which could lead to rise in farmgate prices.

But this marks a grave oversight in observing the significant role of these market committees in local Agri-ecosystem of North India especially the State of Punjab and Haryana both with the richest farmers in India as per capita income. Uncertainty of environmental conditions coupled with high cost of living creates a demand among the farmers for Minimum Support Prices for their crops and Social Security Net by the State in order to survive. This urgency of pre-set rates was otherwise guaranteed by the State-run APMC system which acted like an incentive for many farmers to sell their crops by Public Procurement System for a minimal support irrespective of the inflation.

The union government followed this up by bulldozing the bills in the parliament despite massive opposition. It went to the extent of declaring it passed by the Voice Vote in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Indian parliament despite being in minority. This disregard for due process and established parliamentary tradition for the opposition's clear disapproval during a voice-vote, indicates lack of tolerance for inclusion of diverse opinions.

The Ruling party cannot impose a predetermined course of action and expect smooth acceptance from indignant stakeholders. Using the Covid19 guidelines of physical distancing as a disguised reason to halt the protesting parties from moving further in the Capital city was no longer accepted by the Farmer's Unions. The farmers who got no hearing from the union government despite patiently fighting for months with innovative ways like quiet 'rooftop' protests to rail and road blocks strategies to garner support now find peaceful and democratic confrontation as the only option left to be adequately heard. Under the caprices of Multinational agri-business corporations with sheer profit in mind could result in a chaos for the food security of the country as the State might not take the onus of procur-

ing the leftover farm crops in subsequent years. The ambiguity in the reform bills, further traces no transparency if a regulatory mechanism is not developed in trade area transactions to avoid exploitative practices.

The void between the Government and Farmers is widening because of the Union government's sheer arrogance in the beginning. It met the constitutional right of farmers to protest in a peaceful and democratic way with concrete jersey barricades, tear gas and water cannons to counter hordes of peasants in tractors and trucks. When the ruling party's legislative adventurism faced dissent from farmers, its supporters further tried branding them as anti-national and separatists. This further hard-lined the movement rather than settle skirmishes among interest groups. The movement is ironically united, from the so-called feudal land-owning farmers to the Left-wing associations to the liberal modernist- are all under one banner to stand against the farm laws. The Ruling Party must adopt a conciliatory approach to fill up the major trust deficit due to the expeditious way the Farm Bills were introduced.

The rounds of discussion post the stir at National Capital's borders have so far been inconclusive because of the 'no compromise position' by the union government in the beginning, and equally adamant no compromise below total repeal of the laws by the farmers seeing the new laws as Kaale Kanoon (Black order). The future remains unclear with blurred lines between the role of the Indian State and the role of the Market forces under the name of progress. In the bid for a greater interface between agriculture and industry for modernization of rural economy; they can't neglect the voices of the ones who are solely dependent on the deeply entrenched traditionalist ways. The State's inability in building wider consensus and lack of wider consultation with public sphere is the reason for aggravated protests. State's underestimation of the depth of Stakeholder's anger because of deprivation of adequate chance to express the importance of 'Mandi system' is why this farmers' movement is hailed as the largest in recent memory.

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About the Author:
Gauri Sharma, a post-graduate in Human Rights and duties, is currently interning with the AHRC.

Indian Republic is functioning within constitution despite emergency in 1975

Capitol hill riot a major blot for American democracy

By Kalyani Shankar

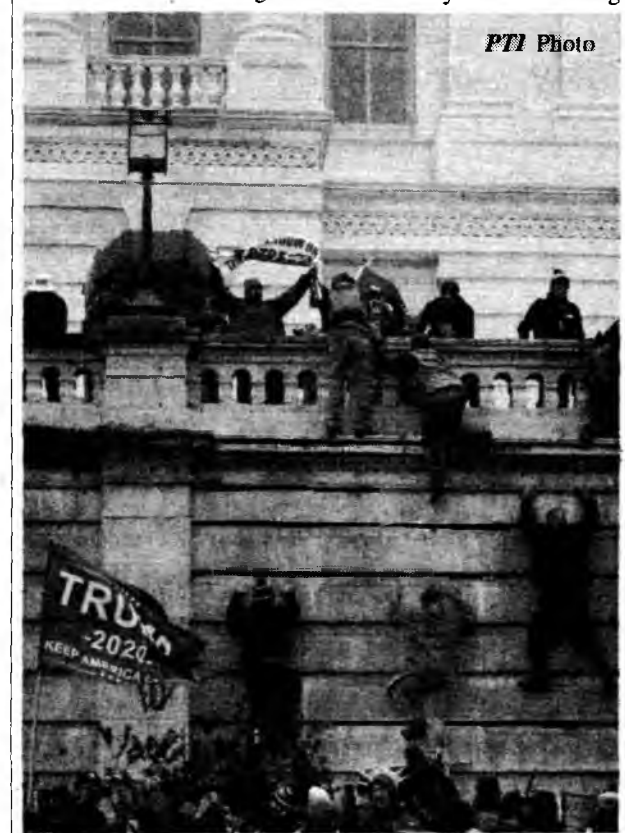
How does the largest democracy India compare with the oldest democracy US on practicing democracy? There is a WhatsApp message doing the rounds "Americans recently found out that it's much easier for them to change presidents in other countries than they can do in their own country."

All through the presidential campaign, Trump had declared that he would not move out of the White House even if he were defeated. His rival Joe Biden retorted that he would be escorted out by the military. But no one expected an attack on the capitol, which is regarded as the temple of democracy. Trump has spent the last two months refusing to concede the defeat claiming mass voter fraud but the worst was his instigation of the capitol riots.

According to the American media, Trump began his most 'infamous' Wednesday morning shortly after 8 AM making a last-ditch effort with a tweet asking his

democracy makes one compare the largest democracy India that has gone through many trials and tribulations in the past 73 years. India notably has faced a smooth transfer of power 17 times. The electorate also had become mature by punishing authoritarian rulers. Even Indira Gandhi who imposed an emergency in 1975 worked within the system, which bears little direct parallels to the current situation in the United States.

In declaring an emergency under Article 352 of the Indian Constitution, Gandhi blamed the "hidden hand" of the CIA for internal unrest. The late President Prefab Mukherjee, who had been a Congressman all his life described the emergency period in his book "The Dramatic Decade": thus: "Suspension of fundamental rights and political activity (including trade union activity), large scale arrests of political leaders and activists, press censorship, and extending the life of legislatures by not conducting



PTI Photo

Vice President Mike Pence to intervene and overthrow the duly elected presidential nominee Joe Biden's election. Pence publicly issued a letter around 1 PM declaring that he would not illegally intervene in Congress, minutes before convening the joint session of the US Congress to certify the Electoral College.

Trump addressed his supporters around 1 PM and declared "We will never give up, we will never concede," and announced "we're going to the Capitol." Trump whipped up the rally into a frenzy. However, he did not join them in the riots that followed in the Capitol and went back to the White House and watched the destruction on Television. At the end of Wednesday after Congress confirmed Joe Biden's victory Trump declared "Even though I disagree with the outcome of the election, and the facts bear me out, nevertheless, there will be an orderly transition on January 20th."

There are many reasons for Trump's audacious behaviour. First of all, he is a bad loser and reluctant to admit defeat. Secondly, now that he has lost the presidency, he would lose all federal protections against prosecutions. Thirdly, he needs his followers so that if he makes a presidential bid in 2024, they might be his support bases. He is also depending on the 73 million who voted for him this time. It is speculated that Trump has made up his mind to contest the next elections and wants to play the role of a martyr. Fourthly, he also has to keep the section of Republicans who support him in the party.

This attack on the US

elections were some instances of Emergency adversely affecting the interests of the people.

Congress and Indira Gandhi had to pay a heavy price for this misadventure." The Emergency officially ended on 23rd March 1977. Congress came down from 352 seats to just 189 seats in Lok Sabha in the 1977 elections. Janata government came to power. People's anger subsided and a subdued Indira Gandhi came back to power in 1980 when the Janata government collapsed. Since then, her successors have confined themselves within the confines of the Constitution.

Even in states where cult leaders like Shiv Sena founder Balasaheb Thackeray or Tamil Nadu chief minister J. Jayalitha or RJD leader Lalu Prasad Yadav remained authoritarian but they operated within the Constitution. So to that extent, India has been lucky that democracy survives.

The American democracy got a jolt by Wednesday's shocking attack on the Capitol. It is not over yet as Trump might make some more attempts till January 20, when Biden takes over unless he is impeached for a second time.

The framers of the US Constitution would never have thought of such behaviour from the sitting president defying the Constitution. In the words of Bob Woodward, "When history is written, Trump's failure to heed the warnings he was given, is going to be probably the story of the failure of the American presidency and the American system to nominate and elect someone who would responsibly carry out the duties of president." (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Woke but not Awake

Editor,
You cannot entirely blame an act based on racism which is exactly what our "woke" colleagues are doing. They are shying away from the facts that disprove their leftist political ideologies. For instance during the BLM (black lives matter) protests and riots in the USA (and I say riot because the moment you take part in vandalism, you become a law breaker and must reap the full consequences of your actions with the law) the number of people in the United States that suffered during these protests and riots was unprecedented in comparison to the recent riot at the US Capitol. The crimes committed during the BLM protests and riots such as vandalizing of private and public properties, destruction of historical monuments, looting and plundering of people's livelihoods that was going on in the name of "black lives matter" didn't get any attention from our "social media warriors" because it disproves their rhetorical political ideology i.e. systematic racism. One of their main arguments is the supposed existential and exponential threat of white privilege and white supremacy in developed western countries in the 21st century.

Blaming everything on the concept of white privilege is ignorance at its finest. Yes white privilege and white supremacy existed in the past centuries but that all changed with the passing of the Civil Rights act of 1964 in the USA and now there is not one law that disavows someone because of race, color, religion or sex. A person irrespective of their roots can now climb up the social hierarchy of life as opposed to the previous generations of people who lived in segregation, slavery, immense hardships, etc. Our generation is fortunate to say the least as compared to our ancestors and we are yet to experience what hardship truly means. I do condemn all acts of terror against the law and against democracy irrespective of which country it takes place in. All law-breakers must suffer the consequences and the full brunt of the law. It is ironic that it is now indirectly alright to be racist as long as you're not white! That seems to be the exact point our liberal friends are trying to make. YOU CANNOT FIGHT RACISM WITH RACISM, YOU CAN ONLY DEFEAT IT WITH LOVE AND KINDNESS.

We should stop normalizing that the color of our skin is what distinguishes from one another, rather it is the content of a person's character that sets them apart. If we are to make judg-

ments without the intention to help them then we shouldn't make one at all. How are people expecting to help others if they can't help themselves first? This is exactly the case with politics today. We are focusing too much on the hardships and problems of others that we are neglecting our own problems and hardships. Women in our country are not as empowered as compared to their counterparts in the west. Poverty is higher in our country than in the west. Discrimination based on race, caste, sex and religion is prevalent in our own country than in any other part of the world as it is the most diverse country with the second largest population in the world. So why don't the youths in our own state in particular and the country in general who are experts in international affairs turn their focus around and start working on empowering the people in our society by helping alleviate or even better to eradicate poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, gender inequality and other social issues that need our utmost attention for the growth and development of our country. We need to stop fighting someone else's battle and start focusing more on the battles raging on our own turf.

Yours etc.,
Jyohanan D. Nongrum,
Via email

Aversion for rural service

Editor,
Gandhi had rightly observed that India lives in its villages. I had read the news report about the Israeli activist Aviram Rozin and his team in Sadhana Forest who are now camping in a village in Meghalaya to turn the denuded lands into forested areas. I also read the Letter to the Editor by Phrang Roy and since I have been in government service myself I would like to add my thoughts to the ongoing discussions on conservation. If truth be told the reason why government schemes fail is because those in charge of implementing them on the ground hardly know the background and nature of the communities and their strong and weak points. Most of these employees don't move beyond the district headquarters or the Blocks. They are all engrossed in desk work and are hardly trained for community mobilization. When they visit the interior villages they hardly listen to what the communities have to say. The villagers are treated as dumb and lacking in basic knowledge but they are actually the farmers and growers who know what is good and bad for the crops and the nature of the soil. The villagers know that

cutting down trees is bad but it's a choice between surviving the cold and letting the trees grow. Contrary to what those in the town think, people in villages cannot afford to have LPG cylinders and to buy refills. The system of distribution even in Shillong city is so irregular so one can imagine what happens in the rural hamlets. Hence the only mode of cooking is firewood which means cutting down trees. So unless there is an alternative to firewood, the trees will continue to be cut relentlessly.

No one has discussed this basic problem of the communities - which is - where to source their firewood from. At the moment the forests offer free firewood. If the villagers have to buy firewood they must also have the buying power. But where will that firewood come? It has to come from our non-reserved forests. I don't know if Sadhana Forest has taken this point into consideration. For everything that is proposed there has to be a viable alternative. I would like Sadhana Forest to respond to this because I would love to see the forests regenerated but who will be their custodians finally? The word community is vague. It is the Dorbar Shnong and Dorbar Elaka that have to bear the responsibility of looking after the forests in their jurisdictions. Can they be held responsible for that?

Yours etc.,
Isabell Khamaioir,
Nongkrem

Raise marriageable age for women

Editor,
Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has stated that the minimum age of marriage for women should be raised from the current 18 years to 21 years. The central government has also constituted a committee by the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development to look into the minimum marriageable age for women. Today, women also have equal rights to receive education and choose their careers like men. Due to the age of marriage of girls being 18, they are forced to abandon their careers and are pushed by their parents and societal pressures to marry early. In such a situation, women are not able to accomplish their aspirations. Hence raising the marriageable age of women is the need of the hour.

Yours etc.,
Amit Singh Kushwaha,
Satna, Madhya Pradesh

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

"You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore."

--- William Faulkner

The Shillong Times

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Precaution no excuse for delay

THE statement given by Principal Secretary Health, Government of Meghalaya that henceforth certain categories of visitors to the State would be exempted from the Covid check at the different entry points is sensible. The official listed VVIPs, VIPs and those in the Intelligence Bureau (IB) etc., whose visits should not be publicised for obvious reasons. No other state tests people for Covid before entering them. All states however ask for a RT-PCR check clearance certificate conducted within 72 hours of travel to the state. Meghalaya needs to follow this procedure. This should be enough because quite a few visitors have reported that while they subjected themselves to the RAT test at the entry points, they were never given a receipt for Rs 500 charged for the test and nor were they given the test certificate but were simply cleared to enter the State. It would seem therefore that the Covid test at the entry point is a mere formality conducted very perfunctorily.

If exemptions are made they should be made for all. Meghalaya cannot treat some citizens as more equal than others. Any visitor entering a state does not want to be unnecessarily delayed. With the MRSSA check having started, visitors also have to queue up for that clearance too and there is needless delay at the entry and exit points. The exemption is being made in respect of people staying in the state for not more than 3 days (72 hours) and symptomatic officials/dignitaries will be subjected to necessary testing protocols. This can be extended to other visitors as well since every visitor has to mandatorily download the Arogya Setu App which will help the health officials of the state to keep a tab on every such person (if that is at all possible). While stringent testing facilities are needed to keep Covid at bay especially now with the new strains from the UK having arrived in India, the testing protocols need to be reset based on the experiences of those manning the checkpoints and also that of visitors. In fact, the Meghalaya Government should open a feedback portal for visitors to register their grievances. That's the only way to improve services. If as has been repeatedly claimed by medical experts across the world that the RAT test for Covid is unreliable and one testing positive could turn out negative and vice versa then it would be fair to assume that RT-PCR test is the best option and the gold standard as far as Covid testing is concerned then why not insist that people conduct that test in their respective states before entering Meghalaya. It would save much time, effort and human resources.

A Madness without Method

By TP Sreenivasan

The US has survived its worst challenge by continuing the democratic process without being overwhelmed by the machinations of an individual.

Nothing unexpected happened on Capitol Hill on January 6th, 2021. President Trump had outlined his choreography and followed it in letter and spirit. There had never been such a transparent insurrection aimed at getting an election nullified. Trump had said that he would try to block the election results at every stage by every means available to him, including violence. He had asked his boys to stand by till they got a signal. When all efforts failed till the matter came to the joint session of the Congress, the only option to him to ensure his pledge was to disrupt the Congress session. And that is what he asked his boys to do, unleashing a bunch of infuriated supporters into the hallowed Congress hall. It was madness without method to stop the proceedings by shooting key leaders, if necessary. The assessment of the president made by a team of 35 psychiatrists and mental health experts in the New York Times bestseller *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump* proved right.

For weeks, shops in New York and Washington had remained boarded up like in the case of an impending storm and many people had left the two cities, fearing violence. The only surprise was that the law enforcement authorities were not as prepared as the attackers were. They appeared taken by surprise or letting them in deliberately to obey the president's orders. The enquiries to follow will establish the facts and many heads will roll, as it has happened to the police chief. Happily, a bloodbath was averted and the lawmakers were moved to safety. The entire responsibility for the event should rest on the shoulders of the president in

elect, but by Trump's own deputy for four years.

In fact, Pence was not the only patriotic American who kept the US going during the four years of the American journey under Trump. An anonymous article appeared in the New York Times on September 5th, 2018, entitled 'I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration'. The writer, who later revealed his identity as Miles Tyler, the chief of staff of the Department of Human Security, wrote: 'The dilemma—which he does not fully grasp—is that many of the senior officials in his own administration

are working diligently from within to frustrate parts of his agenda and his worst inclinations. I would know. I am one of them.... we believe our first duty is to this country, and the president continues to act in a manner that is detrimental to the health of our republic. That is why many Trump appointees have to do what we can do to preserve our democratic institutions while thwarting Mr. Trump's more misguided impulses until he is out of office.'

The cumulative impact of



the events was that Trump himself realised how foolish he was to have unleashed his minions into the citadel of democracy and quickly condemned the attack and pledged a peaceful transition. But it was too little too late. In the ten days that remain for President Trump, avenues are being explored to remove him either through the 25th Amendment or through the impeachment process. Pence will not be game for the 25th Amendment and time is not enough for impeachment. Trump will be more than happy if he is given a general pardon to escape imprisonment and

appear to be the intransigent, fall guy. As for the committee the Supreme Court is said to be constituting, from the names that have been proposed as members, these experts are committed to the very farm laws against which he farmers have been agitating. Ashok Gulati, former director of the International Food Research Institute, has been one of the most sonorous proponent of the changes these laws have ushered in. P.K. Joshi, another former director of IFRI, has been advocate of these changes to give farmers more options to sell their products. Bhopinder Singh Mann, former legislator, has actively asked for the changes. And yet another proposed member, Anti Gawade, from the Maharashtra Kshetkari Sangathan, is a disciple of Sharad Joshi who had campaigned for these changes. Any examination of the farmers' demands by such a committee or interaction with the committee would be a foregone conclusion: only towards cajoling the farmers to come round and gracefully accept the new laws. So the government's remit will be theirs. And by deferring the implementation of three farm laws and constitution an expert committee to make on the ground evaluation of the three laws and their impact, the Supreme Court seems to have taken upon itself what is essentially the function of the union government. But, the court is finding itself in situation in which farmers refuse to take cognisance of what the apex court had thought it was offering them — a convenient olive branch. The farmers have bluntly refused to have anything to do with the Supreme Court's expert committee and refuses to appear before it. Thus, it has created a situation in which the farm laws remain temporarily

Farmers unions and expert panel members belong to differing views SC judgement on farm laws makes no forward movement

By Anjan Roy

The Supreme Court's judgement on the farm laws sounded like a theatre of the absurd. For whom the bell rang. For the government? For the agitating farmers? For neither?

By deferring the implementation of the farm laws with its judgment on Tuesday, the apex court has given a much-needed respite to the union government, while on the face of it, bad-mouthing the government for numerous lapses. "We are staying three farm laws until further orders," Chief Justice SA Bobde said.

On the other hand, the judgement has handed over a fait accompli to the farmers and an indirect ultimatum to withdraw the agitation, failing which the farmers will

stalled without any avenues for negotiations to take the issue forward.

This to a lay person would appear to be the plain case of judicial overreach where neither of the contestants has really asked for its assistance other than some fringe elements.

Unfortunately, the entire proceeding has shown up the progressive hardening of the stance of the agitating farmers. They have demanded nothing short of outright withdrawal of the three farm laws in question whatever their incidence. The government had on its part offered to negotiate even bring amendments which the farmers want. But nothing pleases the farmers. The farm laws incorporate suggestions



and reasoned position on the issue of farm products marketing. For over three decades there have been talks about replacing the existing system of marketing of farm produce and removal of the restrictions on movements of farm products across the state borders. The government had in fact old the court that the laws "were not hurriedly made", that they were the result of two decades of deliberations.

The restrictive provisions on movements of farm products were bright into being by the fear of shortages. A cornucopia of laws were enacted over the initial years which bound the farmers' hands in marketing of their produce. They had to sell their production at the local Mandis and through the state apparatus of marketing. Various dues had to be paid to the local Mandis and market committees and only through them the products could be sold.

The new laws stipulate that the farmers shall have a free hand in selling their produce and they could bypass the Mandis and marketing mechanism by contracting large buyers — the so called corporates — for selling their products at prices booked in advance. This was simply the procedure for forward sales which is all too common for many other products.

An aspect of the entire agitation is to what extent social media could influence matters. In social media the myth was created that farmers' lands will be taken away in case they contracted to sell their produce to large corporate buyers. The myth prevailed over the truth that the farmers would only sell their produce not the land, as even the meanest intelligence would easily know. Whatever the fight, the farm laws are the principal reform measure for the farm sector which had remained outside of any reforms. The opportunity should not now be drowned under mishandling and misunderstanding. (IPA Service)

justice, this world would be a paradise. Whether or not systemic racism is as omnipresent as anti-racists claim it is, is certainly a point to contest. But whether or not systemic racism exists, is not. The contrast between police conduct against activists during the attack on the Capitol and that against BLM activists earlier this year, is stark. Would George Floyd be treated the way he was if he were white? One example of systemic racism lies in the near total absence of other civilizations in college curricula in America — except as tokens or academic ghettos in the forms of various "Studies" ("Women's Studies," etc.). While it is normal to focus on one's own culture first, it becomes narcissistic to ignore the rest of the world. Moreover given the rapidly changing demographics of America, such curricula are no longer representative of the population. Systemic racism (by omission rather than commission) therefore remains entrenched in curricula nationwide. The same may be said (in different terms) of government and industry.

Yours etc.,
Lurshai Lamare,
Via email

Systemic racism alive and kicking

Editor I am writing to contest the letter, "Woke but not Awake," by Jyohanan D. Nongrum (ST, Jan 13, 2021). His words: "Blaming everything on the concept of white privilege is ignorance at its finest. Yes white privilege and white supremacy existed in the past centuries but that all changed with the passing of the Civil Rights act of 1964 in the USA and now there is not one law that disavows someone because of race, color, religion or sex. A person irrespective of their roots can now climb up the social hierarchy of life as opposed to the previous generations of people who lived in segregation, slavery, immense hardships, etc.," while true, are out of touch with reality. If law alone were adequate to guarantee social

Letters to the Editor must have the full name, address and contact number of the writer, even if they are sent by email. Only letters with the requisite details will be published.

TO THE EDITOR

Some sane thinking!

Editor, Please refer to ST Jan 12th 2021 and the headline "Pala bats for modified ILP". Firstly as a voter and a citizen of Meghalaya, let me congratulate Bah Vincent Pala our MP for having a mind of his own and the guts to express it. We are sick and nauseated by the meaningless grovelling of our elected representatives before, "It's only our way or the highway," pressure groups. Relieved to see that at least we have an elected representative who can also act as "U Rangbah Khasi" who can think for himself and the community he represents. Yes, unregulated influx of outsiders into the state is a matter of concern for all genuine citizens of Meghalaya, tribal, non-tribal alike. It is the simple ability of outsiders to integrate and assimilate themselves into the local population that is most worrying. Taken from this perspective it is therefore not the 'entry' of outsiders that is the problem but the ease with which they are able to infiltrate, settle down and merge into the community that is cause for worry. The Ease of Assimilation and not Ease of Entry is the real issue. The most revolutionary idea expressed by our MP is his observation that

"There must be a practical and pragmatic system against infiltration, not merely by putting up a gate." This means searching for a second alternative and not putting all our eggs in one basket. I entirely agree with this observation. If unregulated influx is the genuine concern of the public of Meghalaya, and not a mere gimmick to project wannabe politicians, then solution to the problem must be found in the existing systems of governance and institutions run and managed by the people themselves. We have Dorbars governed by our own communities to whom the task of managing and controlling infiltration and "Ease of assimilation" can be entrusted. The need is to empower what we already have; empower our people and their institutions instead of going in for something bizarre and unknown. We must evolve a sustainable workable solution based on active people's participation to the problem of influx. Setting up of check gates and outsourcing the same to Government whose personnel are susceptible to bribes and inducements, will in the end prove counter-productive. After all a check gate is simply a bamboo pole across the road! Bah Pala's stand also highlights other aspects of life which an ILP might negatively impact upon. The economy of the state cannot

and should not be ignored. In the final analysis it is the economy that decides whether Khasis continue to stay where they are or should our people leave for greener pastures elsewhere. We therefore need to be concerned on the ways Meghalaya generates wealth and revenue. Economic growth and development are aspects of life we cannot afford to ignore. We need to think, side by side, about employment and improved income generation for our people. If Coal, Limestone and Timber are history then other livelihood options for the people need to be considered. The state seems geared up for High End Tourism. So be it and let us prepare ourselves for it. In the process we should also not forget that Education and Healthcare, aside from scenic based tourism, offer huge opportunities for Education and HealthCare related tourism. Privately run hostels for students and the guest houses coming up and around NEIGHRIMS are proof of this. Our people earn revenue from such activities. To promote these two aspects of governance we need to induct expertise and technology from outside. Let us not put self imposed obstacles and hindrances to block our own development. As people of Meghalaya we also have to

recognise the fact that we are a small, underdeveloped, landlocked hill state totally dependent on Central doles and grants for our well-being and survival. We need to get out of New Delhi's stranglehold over us and find new resources and directions for growth. South of us we have Bangladesh a country with a fast growing economy and hungry for all the goods and services we can offer. We are good in English. We can offer our teaching services of the language to the Bangladeshis and other neighbouring countries and earn dollars for such services. Our agricultural products will find a year round market with our Southern neighbour. We got to tweak the Look/Act East policy of the Government of India to make it a Look South issue for Meghalaya. Then we also receive heavy rainfall in the monsoons. 63 billion cubic meters (one cubic meter = 1000 liters) per year. 63 billion cubic meters of ready to drink fresh water every year which the world is ready to pay for in dollars! This water falls on Meghalaya free of cost. We simply need the technology to store and package. We need an outlet to the sea to sell our water product. We need transit facilities through Bangladesh. This is not wishy-washy thinking. That we have not recognised the potential does not mean the potential does not exist. Our policy

"Segregation has no place in the education system."

-- Richard Dawkins

The Shillong Times

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Pro-India US policy

THE declassification of the Indo-Pacific region policy fashioned by the Trump Administration in the last four years is significant in that it stresses on America's resolve to support India at multiple levels in the context of the present border and other problems between the two giant Asian nations. The policy as such was broadly known and there's no surprise other than in the timing of its release – just days before curtains finally fall on the Trump term in the White House.

The policy promises diplomatic, military and intelligence support to India as and when required to enable it to take on its red neighbour bent on expansion of its territories both on land and in the sea. The Galwan Valley offensive by China, which took place on June 15 last and killed 20 soldiers, has worsened India's ties with China that had seemed to improve during the first term of the Modi government. The aggressiveness displayed by China reinforced what was already known to New Delhi – that the 'dragon' cannot be trusted.

The 1962 War, another unprovoked offensive by China against India, is fresh in our minds. Yet, India perhaps erred in courting the red nation yet again even as large swathes of captured Indian land are still with China. The result is also that China virtually dominates India's domestic market, deeply hurting this nation's own manufacturing sector.

Till the turn of this century, China and India were on a somewhat equal footing in terms of economic and military strengths. Now, China has five times the strength of India in military prowess with a matching economic might. Taking on China alone will not be possible for India though Indian soldiers at ground level have demonstrated a superior might vis-à-vis the Chinese People's Liberation Army soldiers in any one-on-one fight. India kept getting valuable information from the US intelligence about Chinese designs on the northern border as also in the seas. At the diplomatic level too, India is getting significant support from the US at UN and related global fora. A reassurance from the just declassified document, which was originally meant for release only 22 years later, is that such support can be expected from the new administration of successor Joe Biden too.

Perhaps, this was the intention of the Trump Administration to release this document at this point so as to tie the Biden team too to following the same course as pursued by Trump. At the same time, Indian responses to Chinese border offensives remain guarded, and appreciably so.

Inner Line Permit as identity marker and placebo

By Patricia Mukhim

The need to differentiate oneself from the 'Other,' to my mind (I am not getting into the theory of 'othering' yet) springs from two paradoxical factors. One, is the sense of superiority over the 'Other' because it has been drilled into our minds that we are a superior race descended directly from heaven (in the case of the Khasis – the Sohpet Bneng) as opposed to the 'Others' whose descent we are unsure of, don't care to know because we consider them interlopers. The second reason could be a sense of insecurity because we consider the 'Other' to be more advanced than ourselves and hence we fear that a competition in a level playing field might result in our being outplayed and outmanoeuvred.

The sense of being a superior race has over time given way to the realism that it's a fantasy because those claims must be backed by real data of human development. A superior people cannot be steeped in poverty. I am referring here to the poverty of earthly goods, poverty of access to resources which have been covered by the elite of the race and the poverty of ideas that impoverish our minds and hence our ability to look beyond the immediate. The 'Other' needs to be constructed if only because we need scapegoats to blame our individual and collective failures on. Hence every once in a while we blame the 'Other' for taking away businesses that we think we could run better than them, again given a level playing field. But the 'Other' succeeds despite the hurdles we create for them, from getting trade licences to paying protection money. So now, we believe that a new set of laws are needed to outdo the 'Other,' who might slip through the many hurdles we have constructed and who we have adroitly assumed to be using women to slither like snakes and work their way into our otherwise robust land tenure system by using the 'women' of the race. In fact, the indigenous land tenure system was found so defective that a modern law had to be enacted in 1972 so that no land could be sold to the 'Other' except in the 10x10 sq km European Ward. But the 'Other' still managed to get land for setting up cement companies, in this case without using

women but the male-centric institutions such as the District Councils and the Dorbar Shnong. Ironically both these institutions are supposed to protect land alienation. How did these institutions fail to deliver on the very premise for which they were created – one as a product of culture and the other a creation of the Constitution?

The 'woman' has always been the Eve of the Khasi society although that is a Biblical metaphor that crawled in later into the Khasi psyche. Yet it is the woman whose body is the location of culture and tradition because she is the carrier of the external markers. In a meeting of the COMSO – the group leading the stir for the Inner Line Permit (ILP) one didn't

protocols, either because they are too poor to afford iron tablets or too impoverished to afford a nutritious diet. But above all, anemia is also due to lack of spacing or family planning and no reproductive rights. So far, training for women with health vulnerabilities has excluded men. If marriage is a partnership then both partners have to agree that the woman's health is more important than producing children and that spacing through family planning methods is no sin.

With all these underlying factors that challenge the very idea that Meghalaya is making progress, since the human development indicators don't lie, is planted an idea that everything has a reason outside the society. As a people we are not used

"For a state that is about to complete half a century we really don't have much to show as credible achievements especially in human and institutional progress."

see a single woman sitting around the table. Women are only good for a show of numbers but their ideas are never considered sound enough to be taken on board. After so many years of evolution and education both, women are still considered unfit to hold office in the Dorbar Shnong and there are reasons galore to support this view, but tradition trumps all of them.

For a state that is about to complete half a century we really don't have much to show as credible achievements especially in human and institutional progress. Our health indicators have not improved even as the number of children affected by malnutrition and under-nutrition are on the rise thereby affecting their cognitive faculties. This means that we will have many more drop-outs who will not be able to reason their way through but will resort to violence when they fail to win an argument. The number of malnourished and anemic women (56% according to NFHS-4 data) is staggeringly high despite claims of intervention by the Health Department perhaps because the real reasons for anemia remain undetected or because women fail to adhere to treatment

to introspection because that requires honesty and candour which is alien to us. Introspection means we prise open our inner selves and ruthlessly check out our own deficiencies as a society and admit we have a problem; take stock of our weaknesses and build on our strengths. No society is without challenges but tribal societies somehow feel that if they introspect then their weaknesses would be an open book and the 'Other' might prey on those weaknesses. The truth is that after all the decades of interface the 'Other' knows us better than we know ourselves and knows our Achilles heel. But that's because we have succumbed to greed and are ready to sell off our natural wealth from timber to coal to limestone which as we all know have benefited a few families. The rest remain outside of that personal economic paradigm that defies the idea of shared ownership of all resources, which is the core idea of being 'tribal.'

It's a travesty that today even water is a commodity that is bought and sold by tribals to other tribals and without any questions being raised as to how a natural resource has become the

property of an individual. It is not the 'Other' that owns coal or limestone mines (if they do so it is through the benami route which again is not possible without the collusion of tribals) or forests or water catchments. The 'Other' does business and pays income tax and other taxes as well as under-hand taxes to sundry groups of tribal pressure groups.

To camouflage our existential dilemma, a few who have learnt the secret of acquiring power, influence and wealth via the route of electoral politics, have successfully trotted the idea that tribals might become a minority in their homeland. This thought carefully turned into lyrics for songs which are played at public meetings turn on our collective emotions and we all converge mindlessly into the fake idea of why we are where we are. Such patriotic songs and appeals to emotions have been the driving force of all our political movements since the 1960s and continue to this day. Meanwhile those who have successfully sold this idea of fear and paranoia have today become affluent individuals after having won elections. The stark reality is that nearly all of our politicians, right from 1972 never came from among the landed gentry except for Mr Maham Singh Sawian. Yet after two innings in politics nearly all politicians own mansions and enjoy all the creature comforts (including expensive swanky cars) they would not have had outside of politics.

This is the sole reason for Meghalaya's backwardness and its sordid human development indices. The 'Other' has very little to do with our self-inflicted pain. But the 'Other' must bear the burden of our crimes because those entrusted with leading us will never admit that they are responsible for the crime of leaving us poorer than we were when we started off in 1972. The ILP is but a drama that is needed as a prop for another set of actors who wish to follow the same trajectory marked out by their predecessors. And we the people can only watch from the sidelines because we have lost our VOICE to sheer poverty. What's on offer during the election is enough for us to sell our souls. Why should we care about development which is a chimera anyway?

Before the EU-China pact was signed, US NSA-designate of Biden Administration had said "we will be entering into an early consultation with our European partners on our common concerns about Chinese economic practices".

potentially dangerous – not least because they fail to take account of the factors that actually drive such confrontations. In fact, when people riot, their collective behaviour is never mindless. It may often be criminal, but it is structured and coherent with meaning and conscious intent. To address the causes of such violence, we need to understand this. The answer to this is related to how people construct group boundaries as we are more influenced by fellow in-group members than out-group members and the extent to which actions are in line with prevailing group norms. Thus, it is the society and its people which can influence groups to either settle disputes through peaceful or destructive measures. And how do we ensure that we pivot towards peace? We must first start with changing our own negative outlook only then can we become the change we want to be.

Yours etc.,
Nathan Nengnong,
Shillong-4

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

Indian diplomacy Challenges in 2021

By Dr. D.K. Giri

The biggest diplomatic challenge in 2021 remains to be dealing with China which New Delhi has been perforce drawn into. The other challenges are fallout of Chinese expansionism and attempts to bully India into a submissive status in Indo-Pacific region. New Delhi will have to brace itself to contain Beijing's coercive diplomacy of flexing its economic as well as military might. The challenge is compounded by world powers caving into Chinese egregious economic diplomacy. The latest to be seduced by Chinese economy is the 27-country European Union. Last December, both EU and China signed the Comprehensive Agreement in Investment (CAI).

After seven years and 35 rounds of negotiations the EU and China concluded the agreement on investment. Germany, which is largely driven by economic interest and has much less of a world role, pushed this agreement under the leadership of Angela Merkel. Obviously, Merkel fell for RCEP-integrated China. The agreement will provide unprecedented access to the Chinese market for European investors. European companies can participate in multiple sectors of Chinese economy. The agreement has to be approved by the European Parliament and the final text will be signed in early 2022 under the French EU presidency.

The signing of CAI speaks EU's priority and perspective on international politics. This is a major inflection point in world diplomacy. The EU was created to promote a set of political values across the globe – freedom, cooperation, federalism, human rights, peace, stability and a rule-based world order. The EU member countries, all practicing democracies, were critical of the Chinese political system which they termed as 'systematic difference'. The EU objected to the security law imposed in Hong Kong by authoritarian China, re-sented the disinformation emanating from Beijing on Corona virus, and the violations of human rights within Chinese territory. The EU was working on a Trans-Atlantic plan to counter the strategic challenge posed by China.

Before the EU-China pact was signed, US NSA-designate of Biden Administration had said "we will be entering into an early consultation with our European partners on our common concerns about Chinese economic practices".

Both Xi Jinping and the EU leaders led by Merkel had a better sense of timing in signing the agreement, days before Biden assumes Presidency. The immediate implication of the CAI is that EU seems to have given up its intent of becoming a global geo-political player. Also, Beijing seems to be saying that democracies have no stomach for a long-term fight as the so-called democratic block constituted by the US becomes a non-starter.

What is the implication of this development on Indian diplomacy? For one, New Delhi could not have prevented EU from signing the agreement. In fact, even Donald Trump, who was the main architect of counter-China policy, signed the Trade-I Agreement with Beijing. The important lesson for New Delhi is to learn the axiomatic truth in international diplomacy, that "even virtuous leaders inevitably must be backed by the availability of material power if they are to enjoy enduring political success". So, limitations of national capabilities have to be overcome. To start with, India will have to open to investments from abroad and build technological and productive capacities. Even during

the pandemic, Chinese economy grew more than those of others while Indian economy nosedived into -20% growth. New Delhi has to catch up with Beijing, which boasts of a five-time higher economy than that of India. India's foreign policy and its much-lauded principles have been bedevilled by its weak economy. The real-politik theorist Hans J. Morgenthau had commented, "India's widespread and chronic poverty prevented it from pursuing its laudable foreign policy objectives". Chronic poverty has considerably reduced but the economic strength is not commensurate with India's potentials for world politics.

Besides a weak economy, there are structural and process problems in our foreign policy even under the present Prime Minister. These problems cut both ways; they have broken the mould in certain areas, but have gone against our image and interest in others. Some observers say that owing to such problems India's foreign policy is floundering. The problems are as follows:

One, foreign policy inputs are coming from nebulous groups outside South Block. For instance, a nondescript NGO was behind inviting 23 European MPs to visit Kashmir immediately after Article 370 was defanged. All those MPs belonged to one ideological block – right-wing Conservative. Therefore, their endorsement of the situation in Kashmir lacked credibility.

Second, the decision-making on foreign policy is centralised; the Prime Minister takes a call on each issue and the Foreign Minister simply executes. Particularly, with Modi, this has been the practice. Trump's visit to Ahmedabad was planned, designed and choreographed by the PM himself. On the 'famous' demonetisation, he took the sudden momentous decision where even the Finance Minister was not consulted. He only piled on later. So, all the grand designs on foreign policy emerge out of the PMO.

Third, Foreign Minister S Jaishankar, a competent career diplomat was hand-picked by Modi and this was the practice in India. But Jaishankar has no grounding in politics. That is his Achilles' heel. Hence the FM does not interact with the public, which he used to as Foreign Secretary. The Foreign Minister should not be kept away from the lime-light.

Fourth, Modi depends too much on personal factors, than structural ones. He has built personal rapport with Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Shinzo Abe of Japan, Donald Trump whose candidature

Modi undiplomatically had endorsed, and perhaps Boris Johnson of UK. It is another thing that all these leaders are populist and conservative. Fifth is the personal angle translating into Summit diplomacy. Summitry should be the end point or the last resort of diplomatic exercise, not the start. If Summit meetings between heads of governments of two countries do not yield results, where does one go! This is what happened between Modi and Jinping in Wuhan and Mallapuram. Xi Jinping could not be swayed. He has come up in politics the hard way and is ambitious about making China the world power. In this mission, he wants to cut India to size to prevent it from being a potential rival in Indo-Pacific region.

Sixth, the Modi regime seems to underestimate the impact of domestic policies and politics on our foreign policy. India's democracy and stability have played a complementary role for India's diplomacy.----INFA

TO THE EDITOR

ILP jibber-jabber

Editor,

Senior politicians continue to spar over the ILP in a seeming stalemate. The daily front-page pronouncements from politicians on this contentious issue is only one-upmanship. So we must support Vincent Pala's position on a modified ILP that does not come in the way of tourism and employment. This is a more pragmatic stand. A blind blockade to supposedly forestall immigrant influx will damage and disrupt the local economy. Tourism has been a boon to the state in the last decade, especially for small vendors and local communities, and such gains must not be lost.

Pala's "modified ILP", even though he has not disavowed ILP, reminds us that a nuanced discussion is needed. He rightly said that the mere presence of gates does not stop illegal coal trucks, so a more effective system is needed. Most tourists will arrive in a tourist taxi through the national highway. As they pass the gate a glance inside may show a family and they can be waved through without stopping or asking for credentials. Or a downloadable pre-registration sticker can be placed on the windshield. In this way, only a few will need full veri-

fication. This will avoid hassle to genuine tourists and prevent long lines.

The entire country is now open to domestic tourists. Why should they come to Meghalaya if they have to suffer hassle and suspicion at a check gate? Word gets around fast and once Meghalaya is branded as a difficult destination, it will be difficult for tourism to recover. Those who are talking about 'high-end' tourism, should remember that first of all, there are very few high-end facilities in the state and that elite tourism benefits only big name hotels and tour operators and not small local businesses.

I know from personal experience and from friends who have visited other states with ILP in the Northeast that it is not leak-proof. ILP will be circumvented easily by those who are determined to do so and it will only deter genuine visitors. The state will be saddled with one more inefficient scheme.

Another big earner for the local economy is education. If we call Shillong as the education hub of the Northeast, then we must have a more enabling system for students from outside the state. Many local schools and colleges have large numbers of students from outside the state. Apart from tuition fees, they support hostels, guest

houses and rented apartments. The out-of-state students are generally from middle to upper-middle class families and they patronize transport, shops and restaurants. Yet while colleges are opening all over the country, and students have returned to hostels, our state government is dilly-dallying, in spite of UGC providing Covid precaution guidelines.

We need a dose of realism. Meghalaya is a light-weight state and the Centre will look at ILP only from a political angle. They are not bothered about our concerns with illegal influx. Furthermore, there is no hard data to show immigrant threat. ILP and Covid have hit the state with a double whammy. Unless we manage these issues in a more nuanced and practical manner, our state will continue to fall behind. We need leaders like Mr Pala to provide realistic and sensible solutions.

Yours etc.,
Glenn C. Kharkongor,
Via email

Why we riot

Editor,

"The democratic process cannot be allowed to be subverted through unlawful protests," tweeted Narendra Modi in response to rioters storming the US Capitol in Washington, DC. On Thursday morning, while con-

demning the chaotic scenes in the American capital, it appeared Modi was issuing an addendum of sorts to his address in a coded message to India: "Distressed to see news about rioting and violence in Washington DC. Orderly and peaceful transfer of power must continue. The democratic process cannot be allowed to be subverted through unlawful protests." What began as a day of reckoning for President Donald Trump's futile attempt to cling to power devolved into scenes of fear and agony that left a prime ritual of American democracy in tatters. "If you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore," Trump told all his supporters at a rally in Washington. He added, "Let the weak ones get out... This is a time for strength." Meanwhile, the president's lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, told the crowd, "Let's have trial by combat." Chaos ensued and the entire capital went into lockdown as rioters raided the Capitol building. Shots were fired, protesters were hit and authorities eventually regained control as night fell. Heavily armed officers brought in as reinforcements started using tear gas in a coordinated effort to get people moving towards the door, then combed the halls for stragglers, pushing the mob farther out onto the plaza and lawn, in clouds of tear gas, flash-bangs and percussion

grenades.

This resulted in the immediate condemnation from a host of countries including Britain, Spain, Germany, Australia and of course, India. This leads to the question why do people have this riot mentality imbued in their sub-conscious mind. The 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, argued that society has a drive towards chaos and destruction. There are three "classical" theoretical explanations of the crowd that endure in the popular imagination. The first, "mad mob theory", suggests that individuals lose their sense of self, reason and rationality in a crowd and hence do things they otherwise might not as an individual. The second is that collective violence is the product of a convergence of "bad" – or criminal – individuals enacting their violent personal predispositions together in the same space. The third is a combination of the first two. To quote from a book on the 2011 English riots "Mad Mobs and Englishmen," "evil and unscrupulous people – often outsiders or enemies – take advantage of the gullibility of the crowd in order to use them as a tool for destruction."

While these explanations are often well rehearsed in the media, however, they do not account for what actually happens during a "riot". This lack of explanatory power has meant that con-

"Capital is that part of wealth which is devoted to obtaining further wealth."

-- Alfred Marshall

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Graft charges lingering on

WHILE the State BJP is focussed on the corruption that has eaten into the vitals of the Garo Hills and Jaintia Hills District Councils, and have been pursuing the matter doggedly for several months now, the Congress on the other hand has been focussing on the illegal mining and transportation of coal. Leader of the Opposition, Mukul Sangma has written to the Chief Secretary who is also the Chief Vigilance Officer on the modus operandi and the false reports on the quantum of coal at the depot and the actual amount that's being transported illegally on a daily basis with the state machinery aiding and abetting the process. The sport verification by the Congress leader who was accompanied by no less than the Deputy Commissioner and the District Mining Officer of West Jaintia Hills district in October last year detected irregularities which were in contravention of the MMDR Act 1957 which lays down the manner in which coal is to be mined and transported and the revenue that should accrue to the state. The amended Act also lays down clear guidelines for mining which includes reclamation and regeneration plans for all abandoned mines – an activity that has not as yet been set in motion in all the mining areas. Large tracts of abandoned mines are left to the elements leading to flooding of nearby operative mines during the monsoons and loss of human lives.

The Congress leader also mentioned the stiff regulations laid down by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) since 2014 when it banned coal mining after the series of coal mining tragedies in Garo Hills. The NGT had stipulated that a Mining and Minerals Act should be in place before the State is allowed to restart coal mining. That Act is yet to see the light of day but mining is going on in full swing in all the mining districts of the state. This calls into question the role of the law enforcement agencies. The entire stretch of the bypass from Thadlaskein on to East Jaintia Hills has a long line of coal trucks and policemen are seen all along the stretch. At one time the coal trucks were at least covered with tarpaulin. Now they no longer feel the need for that. The Police, Transport Department and the Directorate of Mineral Resources have obviously been given orders to allow the free movement of coal trucks and not to keep a check on them. In short the system itself is colluding in this entire illegality. Ironically while the NGT itself was very active during the time of Justice Kataki who has since stepped down, now the Tribunal seems to have taken a lenient view of this matter.

Which way is Meghalaya headed and how long will this venality continue?

The Adani-Ambani connection

By Rajdeep Sardesai

Remember the Hindi films of the 1960s socialistic era when the villain was often the 'evil' exploitative 'udyogpati' (industrialist)? Now, decades later, the farmer protests have recreated a familiar stereotypical 'enemy' figure. In the winter chill of the Singhu border, posters targeting 'Adani-Ambani' jostle for space with those lampooning Prime Minister Narendra Modi. On the ground in Punjab, Reliance Jio telecom towers have been vandalized while Adani products are being boycotted. Such has been the sustained attack on the two corporates in particular that both the Adani and Ambani groups have been forced to issue public statements that they have no plans to enter contract farming in the future. So what explains the manner in which two of India's biggest companies find themselves in the crosshairs of what began as a political confrontation between farm unions and the Modi government?

Corporate India has rarely been targeted in such an unrelenting manner in recent times. The last time a mass agitation appeared to draw business groups so directly into their ambit was during the India Against Corruption protests of 2011. Then, the likes of Arvind Kejriwal chose to repeatedly target specific corporates as part of their wider attack on entrenched political-business elites. But once Kejriwal came to power, he appeared to gradually change tack: the harsh realities of governance saw him slowly pull back from the politics of unbridled accusation.

Instead, the space vacated by the Kejriwal brand of political activism has been filled by the Congress's Rahul Gandhi. It was Rahul who chose to make the attack on 'Adani-Ambani' an integral part of his 2014 election campaign. Undeterred by electoral defeat, he raised the pitch by accusing the Modi government of being a 'suit-boot ki sarkar' in 2015, a jibe that appeared to stick and embarrass the ruling party and almost force it to announce a series of policy initiatives aimed at reinforcing the image of a 'gareebon ki sarkar'. Even the highly

contentious 2016 demonetisation announcement was driven by a desire to change the narrative to an anti-rich, pro-poor political rhetoric.

Now, five years and another election defeat later, Rahul appears to have returned to his pet theme, this time piggy-backing on farmer anxieties. On the face of it, the Congress leadership's attack on 'Adani-Ambani' appears puzzling, even a tad hypocritical. It was the Congress, after all, as the original party of power that built patron-client relations with preferred corporate houses. The Ambani empire took off in the 1980s

form of citizen activism in which there is no place to hide: viral videos now have acquired a life of their own with lines between truth and hype totally blurred. Even the most powerful and influential business houses are now hostage to public rage fuelled by a noisy and frenzied media eco-system in which there are no pre-decided rules of engagement.

Secondly, when the battle of perception is pitched as 'kisaan' versus fat-cat industry and their political patrons, there can be only one winner. A farmer protest can be denounced and demonized only up to a point.



under the benevolent gaze of the Indira Gandhi-Pranab Mukherjee duo. Gautam Adani cut his business teeth in Gujarat when the Congress-backed Chimanbhai Patel government gave him cheap land in the early 1990s. Neighboring Maharashtra too signed early infrastructure projects with the Adanis. Indeed, both Ambani and Adani, like so many other favoured business houses, were beneficiaries of a previous Congress era of licence-permit raj politics.

And yet, it is only now that two of India's wealthiest business groups are finding it difficult to extricate themselves from a snowballing political controversy. What has changed so dramatically? Firstly, the media landscape has transformed in a manner that has completely changed the rules of the game. In a multi-media universe with thousands of varied platforms – from you tube channels to social media sites – it is almost impossible to 'control' the storyline. The government's propaganda machine is now matched by a

The 'anna-data' shivering in the freezing winter when contrasted with the luxurious lifestyles of India's rich is an imagery that is enough to arouse a sense of injustice, thereby ensuring stark emotional responses taking over from any sense of rationality. That the Adanis and Ambanis' comes from Gujarat, the home state of the prime minister, only serves to reinforce the perception that their proximity to power confers an undue advantage. The prime minister too has never hidden his special equations with the Ahmedabad-based Adanis for example: he flew an Adani private aircraft throughout his 2014 election campaign and even arrived in Delhi to take over as prime minister in the same aircraft.

Finally, there is a reality of India's billionaire business groups in the last decade even as the income levels of a vast majority of Indians remain stressed in recessionary times. The near total dominance exercised by specific industri-

alists in lucrative sectors – then be it telecom, petroleum, ports and airports – only serves to underscore an unequal economic landscape in which there is no level playing regulatory apparatus. In normal times, this might have been overlooked: after all, the liberalization era has seen the Indian middle class finally stop vilifying the wealth-creating billionaire as necessarily 'evil' and actually celebrate entrepreneurial zeal. But in Covid times, where jobs are being lost, the future is uncertain and growth is paused, there is a sense of disquiet over acutely disproportionate benefits being conferred on a few.

To that extent, the farmer protests against 'Adani-Ambani', however amorphous they might be, are symbolic of a wider discontent against emerging market monopolies and the fears, real or imaginary, that these monopolistic tendencies will only widen income differentials in the future. Rather than focus on a genuine cost-benefit analysis of farm reform, the politics of maligning industrialists has been revived. This now boils down to a trust deficit, a growing mistrust of the nexus between untrammelled state power and big business. In 2014, Mr Modi swept to power by promising to act against political corruption. 'Na khaonga, na khane doonga' (I won't be bribed or allow anyone to take a bribe) became a rallying cry that served as a magnet for millions of Indians who were angry and fatigued with a scam-tainted UPA government. Mr Modi has managed to artfully keep his personal image more or less intact but the charge of cronyism is one which he needs to still shake off. Else the gentle winds blowing across the Singhu border will only gather more speed.

Post-script: At the Singhu border, I met a group of young farmers who happily showed me the latest video mocking the 'Adani-Ambani' bond with the government. Interestingly, I noticed they were all Jio mobile subscribers!

(The writer is a senior journalist and author. Email: rajdeep.sardesai52@gmail.com)

SC Farm Committee Distrust of centre grows

By Insaif

It's a non-starter. The Supreme Court's four-member committee has already hit a roadblock. Not only is

through video conference across 3006 vaccination sites. The Centre has rolled out Covishield, Oxford vac-



it not trusted by the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee but one of the members has promptly recused himself. So, the apex court putting the three farm laws on hold on Tuesday last and naming a committee to "assuage" the farmers' "hurt" and creating space for dialogue, as

cinema manufactured by Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech's Covaxin in 12 cities for the first phase. While it will spell out the proportion it will provide the States the vaccines, it's for them to distribute these as per their 'priority groups.' But it has sent clear instructions that sites for the vaccine, as

plated is of little help, to either side in Delhi. The AKSCC won't participate in the panel's process as its members "are people known for their support to the three Acts, don't support their demand for repealing of the bills, as they believe these will benefit the farmers immensely." They aren't wrong. For former MP and National President, Bhartiya Kisan Union (Mann) Bhubinder Singh Mann, recused himself from the committee on

cannot mix the vaccines, as whoever is inoculated at a site will need to come back for the same vaccine second shot on Day 28. Clearly, the States need to be prepared and must do their

Thursday last saying: "As a farmer myself and a Union leader, in view of the prevailing sentiments and apprehensions amongst the farm unions and the public in general, I am ready to sacrifice any position offered or given to me so as to not compromise the interests of Punjab and farmers of the country...I will always stand with my farmers and Punjab." So it's back to square one—the rickety dialogue table.

Haryana Rumblings? Be that as it may, realistically should one have hope? Unless there is a miracle, the stand-off gets terser. Punjab and Haryana farmers have upped the ante. The festival of Lohri was aptly used to express anger and anguish. Union activities and ordinary folk burnt copies of the farm laws across villages and towns in solidarity with the over 50-day-long protest against a stubborn Centre. Terming the committee as just 'hogwash', supporters accused Modi's government of being 'authoritarian and promoting crony-capitalism'. The ambers are igniting pressure on Khattar's government in Haryana as the party has put on indefinite hold its awareness programmes on the laws to 'avoid confrontation'. But there is more than meets the eye. Khattar is trying to keep its alliance partner, the JJP in good humour. With Deputy CM Dushyant Chautala meeting Modi and Home Minister Shah, all doesn't seem well. Chautala is under pressure from his MLAs, as they sense people turning against them. Worse, the State Congress claims some are even in talks with them. It has written to Governor Arya, urging an emergency session of the Vidhan Sabha, where it proposes to move a no-confidence motion on the first day. Wishful thinking alright, but miracles can happen. New Delhi shouldn't miss the woods for the trees.

Vaccine Roll Out On Saturday the big vaccination drive begins across States. Three lakh-odd health workers will get the first shot, first day, to be inaugurated by Modi

homework. However, there is a nagging question, how many will willingly come forward to take the shot. Will there be a choice offered of which vaccine they want to opt for? Both are shrouded in controversy, but Covaxin more so as no data of phase 3 trials is available for it. The urgency of going ahead with the vaccination drive is to make a political statement to the world that India is not behind. But confidence is critical. Perhaps the Prime Minister or Health Minister taking the first shot would help!

Panchayat Seats Auctioned! Grassroots democracy takes a severe beating, it's too far sale! The Election Commission has cancelled elections of two gram panchayat seats in Maharashtra --Umrane village, Nashik and Kondamali, Nandurbar, following complaints and videos of their auction. The two fetched Rs 2 crore and Rs 42 lakh respectively. But should this come as a surprise, given that the role of both money and muscle power in elections by now is no secret? Nirvachan Sadan has to act nevertheless as the auctioning is "contrary to the spirit of democracy". It ordered the district collectors to investigate and take legal action against those involved. Not easy, as Nadurbur DC reported back saying the people seen participating in the auction never filed their nominations! The trick being those who win the auction don't normally contest the polls but field family members or other proxies. Plus, there's no money trail as influential villagers take a call on candidates and ask them to contribute funds for a common cause, be it a school or a temple, or whatever is not covered under government schemes. The one who commits maximum money gets the go-ahead to contest while others are managed. Perhaps this explains why many of the panchayat seats go uncontested. It's time for law makers to seriously push for electoral reforms, which sadly continue to be in cold storage. INFA

TO THE EDITOR

Matriliney is our strength

Editor,
As a Pnar and as a woman, I am proud of the fact that I belong to a matrilineal society and community; a society that draws its lineage from the mother. This is what makes us different from the rest of our fellow brethren in the country. Do I want to compromise my identity and exchange matrilineal to patrilineal? No! When the Nairs gave up matrilineal system, I for one was elated in this belief that we the Khasi-Pnar will hold on very dearly to our matrilineal system. I remember, as a student, my classmates from mainland were highly impressed and were in awe of the society and community that I come from. This gave me a feeling of pride of how beautiful and unique we are. The beauty of being a Khasi-Pnar lies in the bare fact that we are a matrilineal society and a change to patrilineal system will make us no different from the rest of the country and the world. Yes, we are moving along with the passage of time; be it food habits, clothes we wear, houses we live in, transport and communication, education, etc., but does this mean that retaining our roots means that we are old fashioned, back-

ward and obsolete and depriving the rights of our male counterparts? Well no! What we need is to come together as a community and preserve our matrilineal system and nurture our children to be firmly rooted to the society they are born in. Yours etc., Jenniefer Dkhar, Via email

It's a bleak future for the country

Editor,
This is in response to Mr AL Hek's assertion that it's bleak days for the Congress in Meghalaya and at the Centre. Ironically it's been real bleak days for all Indians since Nov 2016. Making electoral gains through polarisation and yet there are more Indians today living with BPL status; this is definitely not a sign of development. India's development agenda has been hijacked and it's been replaced by bigotry. The dream of becoming a 5 trillion dollar economy can only be achieved when there are no second class citizens in the country. The agenda that has been adopted since 2014 has actually been detrimental to the economic growth of this nation. A course correction is urgently required. And

when that's the real story in the rest of India, Meghalaya is definitely not an island. Yours etc., Tyrone D'Brass Tura

Individual racism not systematic racism

Editor,
I am writing to contest the article "Systematic racism alive and kicking." (ST, Jan 14, 2021) by Deepa Majumdar contesting my article "Woke but not awake." Systemic racism is really a morphis term. It could mean that the institutions of today like police departments are racist in which case everyone with the right mind would oppose them or it could mean that all inequalities are based on a racism which is not a sustainable argument. The argument to the infamous unfortunate death of George Floyd is how he would be treated differently by the police if he were white! Well what happened to Mr. Floyd was indeed unjust and brutal and I do believe that if the police personnel irrespective of which country are unjust to your actions and your pleas for surrender, he or she should be tried and con-

demned if found guilty. What happened to Mr Floyd was not an example of systematic racism rather it was an example of individual racism. Individual racism revolves around the nature of a human being and how he or she was brought up. Systematic racism in the United States revolves around the concept that all unjust things happening to African Americans in the 21st Century is because of racism which is absurd. What the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement is doing right now is causing a massive stereotype that all police personnel are bad and racist people irrespective of facts and statistics not backing up their absurd claims. What the left is doing is influencing victimization and feelings over hard evidence and facts.

Yes I do agree that individual racism exist but I strongly disagree that systematic racism exists in the United States in the 21st century. You cannot judge an entire community of people based on the actions of a few handful individuals because good cops do exist and good people too. Our liberal friends would rather create discrepancy amongst the people of society rather than try and help unite it with good. A good act does not wash out the bad nor the bad the good.

Yes law alone is adequate to guarantee social justice from systematic racism because there is not one law in the constitution of the USA that discriminates against, any particular race. Law however is not adequate enough to guarantee social justice from individual racism.

With all due respect, you cannot disprove my former argument and you cannot prove the claims that you have stated for your argument when you have stated no facts or statistics that back up your claims in your disputations. Yours etc., Jyohana D. Nongrum Via email

Corruption endemic in Meghalaya

Editor,
We had some hope when the BJP became part of the NPP Government that corruption as happened in the past would come to an end because Prime Minister Modi vowed to fight corruption. Demonetisation was supposed to put an end to black money and cleanse the system. Later we found out that it was only a ploy to win the UP elections. In Meghalaya we find that the two MLAs of the BJP are quite comfortable to carry on

with the MDA government despite its blatant acts of corruption on all fronts but more so in the manner in which the funds from the GHADC have been siphoned off to schemes that have produced no results. It seems that there is a disconnect between the BJP as a party and the MLAs. Recently the Meghalaya BJP team went to Delhi to meet the higher ups in the Party and brief them about the state of affairs in Meghalaya.

For us common people it is painful to see that our State of Meghalaya is getting nowhere and is only going downhill. I am saying this as an elderly citizen of the state who had taken part in the Hill State Movement. We feel betrayed and defeated by the manner in which the government is being run in the present day. It seems to be that we are hoping in vain and that every election turns out the worst elements to run this State. I despair and so do many others but we don't know how to retrieve the situation. Yours etc., Juliana Marpna, Via email

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

Groundbreaking self-portraits by women

Jennifer Higginson author of a new book about women's self-portraits to be published in March on female artists whose depictions of themselves helped secure their place in history

The museums of the world are filled with paintings of women by men. Ask around and you'll find that most people struggle to name even one female artist from before the 20th century. But women have always made art, even though, over the centuries, every discouragement from laws to religion and convention, the pressures of family and public disapproval was, and in some places still is, put in their way.

Until the advent of modernity, women were expected to be wives, mothers or nuns, not artists or writers; they had no political agency and, unless their father was a painter, they had very little or no access to any kind of artistic training.

As it was in the financial, cultural and, we can assume, emotional interests of men to discourage women from pursuing a career, women were denied access to materials, to training and to the essential space and time every artist needs to nurture their talent.

Although women were active in the Middle Ages in crafts and illumination, we know very few of their names. In the Renaissance, women were forbidden to work on scaffolds, so they couldn't be commissioned to make frescoes.

Public art schools for women didn't exist until the late 19th century; and even if they studied with a private tutor, in the main women were forbidden to work from life models and so were prevented from learning a central skill required by the professional artist. That is why so many female artists specialised in botanical and scientific studies, still life and self-portraiture: you might not be allowed to study a naked man, but your own body was another matter. Over the past 500 years or so, there are countless stories of women struggling to be accepted as serious artists in the face of mass exclusion. Here are some of them.

Almost 500 years ago, in Antwerp, a young woman painted a self-portrait on an oak panel: Once done, she carefully inscribed some Latin words on its surface. Translated, they declare: 'I Catharina Van Hemessen



(L) Self-Portrait in A Straw Hat by Elizabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun. (R) Self-Portrait by Catharina Van Hemessen

have painted myself / 1548 / Here aged 20.'

To our 21st-century eyes, van Hemessen's self-portrait could be dismissed as a charming, slightly clumsy curio painted by a woman at a time when few women were professional artists. However, this small picture is in fact a groundbreaking work of art: it is widely believed to be the earliest surviving self-portrait of an artist of any gender seated at an easel and van Hemessen, who was to become a court artist in Spain, is the first female Flemish painter whose work we know of.

I like to think of it as an act of defiance. 'I am a woman painting,' the artist seems to be saying, 'and you

can't stop me.'

In 1633, the 24-year-old Judith Leyster became the only woman, alongside 30 men, to be accepted as a member of the Haarlem Guild of St Luke. This meant that she could sell her work, establish a workshop and take apprentices.

Although celebrated during her lifetime, she was largely forgotten after her death. Until 1893, her paintings were assumed to be by Frans Hals or her husband, Jan Miense Molenaer.

Her delight and pride in her craft are evident. Wielding 18 brushes, she is in the midst of painting her earlier work, Merry Company (a can-

vas that realised 1,808,750 in December 2018 when it was sold at Christie's in London). She is dressed in her finest clothes, a sartorial celebration of her craft and the wealth it has afforded her. She turns to greet us, smiling; it is as if she is speaking directly to us.

After centuries of silence, now we can hear her: this brilliant self-portrait, which for centuries was assumed to be by Hals, was only definitively attributed to Leyster when the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. acquired it in 1949.

Marie Antoinette's favourite artist, Elisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun is now best known for her scandal-

ous self-portraits. In 18th-century France, according to the historian Colin Jones, a smile that showed the teeth suggested the subject was 'plebeian, insane... or else in the grip of some particularly powerful passion'. It also might have had something to do with the fact that King Louis XIV had no teeth left by the time he was 40, and it wasn't done to gloat.

Self-Portrait in a Straw Hat is the young artist's playful homage to Peter Paul Rubens' 1622 painting of Susanna Lunden, Le Chapeau de Paille ('The Straw Hat'). Despite the title, her hat is felt, not straw. In her painting, Vigée Le Brun a brilliant self-promoter has corrected Rubens' mistake: a luxurious straw hat, deco-

rated with flowers and a feather, adorns her golden curls. Holding a large palette and a fistful of brushes, she smiles out at us, allowing us a glimpse of her dazzling white teeth.

In Paula Modersohn-Becker's life-size self-portrait, she pictures herself cradling her pregnant belly, her head at a quizzical angle, with a soft expression of curiosity. Her features are raw, free of makeup or artifice; her brown eyes shine with intelligence and personality. Like Catharina van Hemessen's self-portrait centuries earlier, the painting is inscribed. Translated, it reads: 'I painted this at age 30 / on my 6th wedding day. P.B.'a return to her maiden name, Paula Becker.

However, the pregnancy depicted here is symbolic. Modersohn-Becker had, in fact, just abandoned her husband in Worpsswede, Germany, and moved to Paris in order to paint full-time.

At a time when women artists were often sidelined or ignored, what she was expecting was not a child but the fulfilment of her creativity. Today, the painting is admired not just for its modernity, but because it is considered to be the earliest known naked self-portrait by a woman.

One day in Paris, in 1934, a young Hungarian-Indian woman painted a self-portrait as a Tahitian, despite never having been to the South Pacific. Apart from a small cloth draped across her lower body, she is naked. Her body is outlined with the pale green shadow of a man. He is blocking the light.

In the last decades of the 19th century, Paul Gauguin had portrayed, again and again, semi-naked women in French Polynesia. In Amrita Sher-Gil's self-portrait, art history is at once revered and reworked.

Young, brown-skinned women had for centuries been reduced to stereotypes, as signifiers of primitive passion. Here, the artist has taken back control of her representation. There is no shame in her nakedness: her skin is what she proudly inhabits. She is a creature of the West and the East and subservient to no one. She is Sikh, Hungarian, a painter and the subject of a painting her painting. She is not a type: she's a person. (IANSLife)

A priceless collection

By Vishnu Makhijani

It is an anthology that took 10 years to compile but that's not surprising given that it takes in 200 years of Indians writing prose and poetry in English and what emerges is a priceless collection of something that has never been attempted before.

"We started talking about the book, or one like it, about eight or ten years ago. But it was only an idea and it never got anywhere, mainly because I did not know where to begin or where to find the essays, especially of the 19th century," its editor, poet-translator-anthologist Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, told IANS in an interview of *The Book of Indian Essays* (Black Kite).

"At first I thought of restricting the book to essays written since independence, then pushed it back to cover the 20th century, then decided to take in the whole period of writing in English in India, from around the 1820s to the present.

"We have never had a selection of essays for the general reader before and I thought that if we were going to do one we may as well include the 19th century, particularly since I knew at least two essays that I wanted to include the ones by (poet and assistant headmaster of Hindu College Calcutta Henry Louis Vivian) Derozio and (author-historian-poet), Shoshee Chunder Dutt.

"They would otherwise have remained buried in books that only a handful of specialists would ever read. Which is sad, for the essays, when they were written, were aimed at the magazine or newspaper reader of the time and not for the specialist of the future," Mehrotra explained.

Given his vast research, does he see the writing in English evolving over the 200 years that the book covers?

"Unlike science, literature does not evolve. Unlike economies, it does not stagnate or grow. Something written let's say in the 1870s, Shoshee Chunder's *Street Music of Calcutta* for example, might have been written yesterday in Delhi, if anyone in Delhi had the brains to listen to street cries and write an essay on the subject. The essay (or

poem) is immersed in the moment, but it is a moment that's been illuminated and which the passage of time cannot darken.

"Literature does not evolve but neither does it fade. Parts of it can of course be neglected and sink into obscurity. *The Book of Indian Essays* is an attempt at rescuing a few pieces of prose before they disappeared altogether, though their sen-

tences, had you stumbled upon them, would have lost none of their newness and surprise, as Derozio's and Shoshee Chunder's have not," Mehrotra contended.

He also noted that while Indians have been writing prose for 200 years, and yet when we think of literary prose we think only of the novel.

"The 'essay' brings only the

school essay to mind. Those of us who read and write English in India might find it hard to name an essay even by someone like R.K. Narayan as easily as we would one of his novels, say *Swami and Friends* or *The Guide*. Our inability to recall essays is largely due to the strange paradox that while the form itself remains invisible, it is everywhere present.

"The paradox becomes even more strange when we realise that some of our finest writers of English prose did not write novels at all, they wrote essays. The anthology is an attempt at making what has always been present also permanently visible," Mehrotra explained.

To this end, the 45 essayists in the anthology include some of the best-known Indian writers of English, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Aubrey Menen, G.V. Desani, Dom Moraes, Sheila Dhar, Madhur Jaffrey, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Chitrita Banerji, Mukul Kesavan and Pankaj Mishra, to mention just a few.

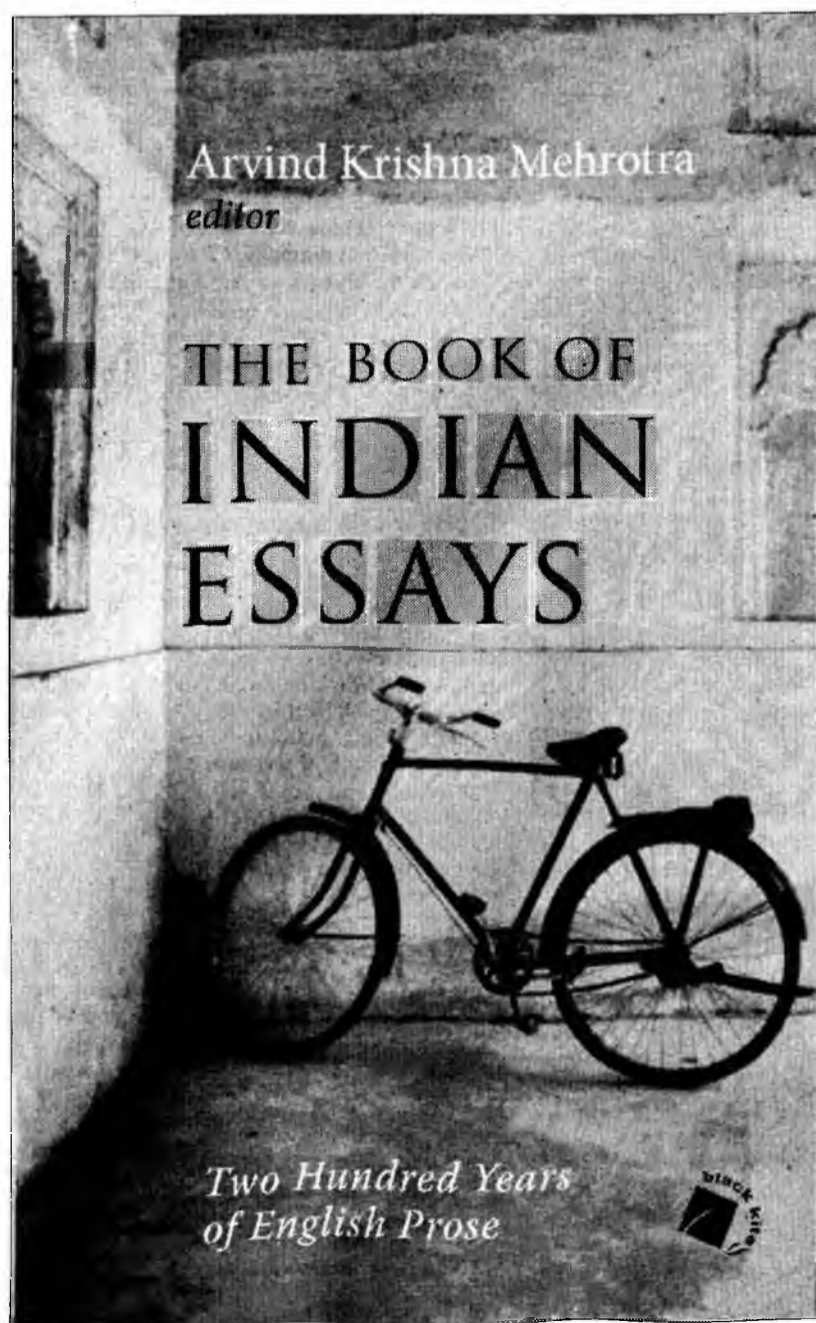
Working as an alternative history, the anthology is impressive in its range, taking in the reflective essay, the luminous memoir, the essay disguised as a story, the memorable prefatory article, the newspaper column that transcends its humdrum origins, the gossip piece that oozes literariness, the forgotten flower in the long-dead magazine, the satirical putdown - all of them find a place.

This is Mehrotra's 21st work. How does he find the time and energy for this?

"Time is something we are always short of but in this I was fortunate. I retired from my job the day it started. Since I started at a young age, at 21, I retired early. You could say that I have been retired all my well-paid working life. The job I had was teaching English at the University of Allahabad. It was as undemanding on my time as it was on my mind. The only way to keep the mind from rotting away and falling off and immersing it in Sangam was to write or translate or edit books," Mehrotra concluded.

Power to those of his ilk!

(The author can be reached at vishnu.makhijani@ians.in)



GRAND SLAM The history of Indian tennis

The history of Indian tennis begins in the late 19th century, soon after it was established as a competitive sport in England. The sport quickly caught the imagination of the colonised just as much as it had of the colonisers. In those early years, Mohammed Sleem, the Fyzee brothers, S.M. Jacob and Ghaus Mohammed (whose genius was sadly curtailed by the Second World War) were the heroes tennis needed, claiming it for India.

After Independence, a new set of players set the courts ablaze: Dilip Bose, Sumant Misra, Naresh Kumar and the dazzling Ramesh Krishnan, who remains one of India's biggest icons. In the 1970s and '80s, Vijay Amritraj and Ramesh Krishnan established India as a regular on the international stage, until finally in the mid-1990s, Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi earned the country its first Grand Slam titles.

Today, tennis is deeply entrenched in India, with players like Rohan Bopanna and Sania Mirza — the superstar who transformed women's tennis in her country — being huge sporting icons and much sought after for endorsements. Anindya Dutta's *Advantage India - The Story of Indian Tennis* (Westland) is a deeply researched and engaging account of the exhilarating journey of Indian tennis, with a special

section on the doubles game and on women's tennis in India. A must-have for every sports lover.

Dutta is an international banker-turned entrepreneur doing work on sports-led leadership development, and has spent the past two-and-a-half decades working in major financial markets — London, Hong Kong, Mumbai and Singapore. He is deeply interested in sports history and is a sportswriter by vocation.

His first book, *A Gentleman's Game* (2017), was followed by his widely acclaimed and bestselling account of the greatest bowling spells in the history of cricket, *Spell Binding Spells* (2017). His next book, *We are the Invincibles* (2019), a fascinating account of Don Bradman's 1948 team's tour of England also received critical acclaim.

Wizards: The Story of Indian Spin Bowling published by Westland Sport in 2019 won India's Cricket Book of the Year Award at the Ekamra Sports Lit Fest.

Besides penning books, Dutta is also a columnist for *Sportstar*, *The Cricketer Magazine*, *Firstpost*, *Hindustan Times*, *ESPN-cricinfo*, *Cricketer Monthly*, *Cricketer Soccer*, *Roar* and *Foundation Ink*.

Delicately maintaining his work-write balance — entrepreneur by day and writer by night — Dutta lives in Singapore with his highly supportive wife Anisha and canine daughter Olu. (IANS)

The art of writing contemporary fiction

Sikkim-born author Pankaj Giri, who began his writing career with a book review blog and after several years of honing his writing skills, wrote his debut solo novel *The Fragile Thread of Hope*, says readers are tired of the "bestselling commercial fiction authors who churn out the same ordinary, cliched stuff again and again. Even they want to read original, heartfelt stories about real people with flaws, the complicated relationships between them, their struggles and how they overcome them. They can't find such books in the bestseller lists and thus they turn towards foreign authors instead. But there are good books out there. They just need to somehow reach the readers".

The e-book version of his inspirational fiction novel was selected as a top 5 finalist in the Amazon Pen-to-Publish Contest 2017. Giri says he's on a mission to revive the dying contemporary fiction genre in India.

According to the author, fiction in India primarily belongs to two extremes: literary fiction and commercial fiction. Literary fiction is mostly high-brow sophisticated, containing sophisticated, descriptive language and based on political, elite-class themes, with the narration being character-based rather than plot-based. Commercial fiction, on the other hand, is something that is meant to be consumed by the masses, devoid of descriptions and containing colloquial language, the plot primarily revolving around casual themes like college love, friendships, and breakups.

Pankaj Giri, before writing the now bestselling novel *The Fragile Thread of Hope*, knew he needed to read extensively first. Apart from *Harry Potter* and *The Shiva Trilogy*, he had not read much until then. He started with commercial fiction. "I

claimed novels. I tried out a Booker Prize-winning novel. I found it abstract and confusing, the narration oscillating between the past and present too frequently for my liking, and the writing was too complex, filled with big words. I craved for something more accessible."

"Then, I chanced upon two books," says Giri, *Sister of My Heart* by Chitra Divakaruni and *The Forgotten Daughter* by Renita D'Silva. I fell in love with the writing and narration. The language was poetic yet lucid, without the usage of any unnecessary big words. The descriptions were vivid and yet not excessive like you find in literary fiction, and the plot, despite being mature, was as immersive as in a commercial fiction. And the best part was that I could sympathize with the characters and feel the emotions. These books seemed to follow the middle path, containing the best of both worlds."

In contemporary fiction, plots generally revolve around family, love, and different kinds of human relationships, with an underlying message of hope or some kind of an inspiration or lesson.

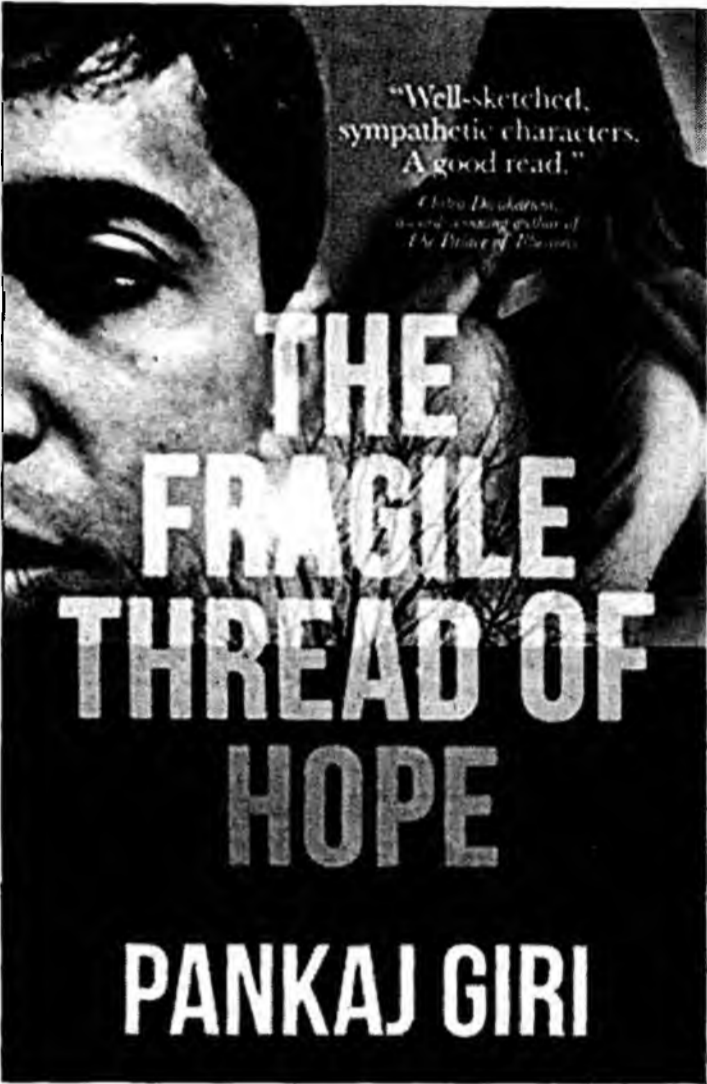
"I wanted to write something similar, something based on family relationships, something emotional yet inspirational. That's when the plot of *The Fragile Thread of Hope* began taking shape. I decided to

base it in my native place Gangtok so that I could garnish the story with some local traditions and the beauty of the landscape, which, I thought, would add a different dimension to the read."

When asked if he feels he has managed to write a good contemporary fiction, he says, "I have a long way to go, this is just my first book, but I feel I have made a decent contribution to the contemporary fiction scene. Ever since I began writing, I am constantly on the lookout for well-written fiction by Indian writers. However, I have come to notice that there is a severe dearth of such books. I wanted my book to bridge the gap between literary and commercial fiction, and I believe it has succeeded to a certain extent. The critical acclaim is testimony to that fact. Now, it just needs to reach more readers to be regarded as a notable commercial success."

"Recently, I have had the pleasure of reading three amazing contemporary fiction books. *Two and a Half Rainbows* by Siddhartha Krishnan, *Prisoners of Secrets* by Lata Gwalani, and *A River on the Wall* by Stormy Hazarika. I posted the reviews on my social media timelines as well. I want to promote good contemporary fiction from fellow authors. However, unfortunately, these books either languish somewhere at the bottom of the Amazon rankings or are not available in bookstores. They don't get the readership they deserve, whereas very average commercial fiction novels hog the bestseller charts. It's unfair."

He says, "With a dedicated promotion strategy, extensive distribution throughout bookstores in India, and a combined effort from the author and the publisher, it can be done. Moreover, good contemporary fiction needs to come out regularly. That way even if one of them somehow finds commercial success, it might pave the way for the others as readers would want to read similar books. Who knows, right?" (IANS/ife)



Online abuse cannot be normalised: Zoya

By Siddhi Jain

Director and producer Zoya Akhtar's success with titles like *Made in Heaven*, *Luck by Chance*, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* and *Gully Boy* has not protected her from intense cyberbullying and trolling. Zoya recently shared her experiences that have made her leave the social media platform Facebook entirely. She said that because of the extreme levels of trolling and abuse she has faced, she is reluctant to sign into the negative energy on Twitter, and has had to switch off the comments on her Instagram account.

Population Foundation of India and the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) recently organised a session titled, 'Cyber Bullies: Anonymity and Accountability'. The conversation between acclaimed director Zoya Akhtar and Mihir Sharma, a Senior Fellow at the Observer Research Foundation underscored the dangers of cyberbullying. Mihir Sharma is the author of *Restart: The Last Chance for the Indian Economy* and the co-editor of *What the Economy Needs Now*.

Zoya has been repeatedly targeted and attacked for her Muslim identity, gender, and looks by both men and women. Most devastating are comments that threaten either physical or sexual violence. She says, "Social media gives people anonymity while bullying and abusing just about anyone and there is no accountability. The fact that social media platforms enable the abusers of women by not identifying them or holding them accountable is a recipe for disaster because it is just a matter of time before the virtual abuse seeps into real spaces."

Zoya also expressed concern over the fact that this kind of online abuse spares no one, not even young girls for whom the psychological damage may prove to be debilitating. This deterioration in online discourse, however, she says, is not a recent development but a

trend that has become increasingly toxic. She believes there will come a time when alternative platforms with more stringent checks will emerge as a counterpoint, while the existing platforms will either have to change their moderation policies or will remain saddled with only bullies abusing each other.

It is important to highlight abuse and the abusers who threaten and



prevent women and the vulnerable amongst us from expressing themselves freely, said Poonam Muttreja, Executive Director, Population Foundation of India, in her introduction to the session.

"We cannot afford to ignore online abuse simply because it is so prevalent. The consequences of online and offline abuse are equally dangerous and we must call out and push back against bullies and trolls. Online violence is simply another form of violence and can easily transform into offline abuse as well. Technology is a force of good and we cannot let it be vitiated and misused in this way."

(The author can be contacted at siddhi.j@ians.in)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, January 17, 2021

Moon sextile Venus on your solar return chart and it ensures a very fortunate time period ahead. You will be dynamic in your approach and would love to take challenges. You will be daring and will take the things to its logical conclusion. You will shine at your workplace. And will have new ideas. You will love to work in team spirit and will love to take everyone along. Your colleagues and superiors will give you full support. Your social life will be very active and you will be making lot of friends. Friends will help you from time to time. Relations with your younger brother will be good. Your equations with your mate will be perfect. You will have ample job opportunities. And those in business will make good profits. A chance of getting married appears bright. Health will remain perfect. You will be undertaking lot of business related trips which will prove to be very beneficial.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

Your endeavors, confidence and courage bring success in monetary gains and your energy increases for work projects and your job environment is lively. This is a time for self-expression when you have lots of energy, but not necessarily the self-discipline to match. You express yourself creatively, through activities with children, romantic hobbies, or sports, short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly. It is easier than usual to be sensible about your diet, health, hygiene, and fitness needs.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

This phase brings love, harmony and entertainment in professional and personal relations. Your mind is often distracted, particularly when required to stick to a routine. You might spend a lot of time in traveling and visiting friends and relatives. You are slightly more defensive and certainly more protective than usual. You might engage in arguments with, or on behalf of, those closest to you. Focus and a centering of thoughts is called for to achieve a balance. Your attention to the logical world of reason is a focus.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for higher studies, travel, or brand new subjects. This enables you to make headway on the professional front. You will be considerably more productive, healthy, and focused. Extra care should be exercised when it comes to writing letters, emails, making phone calls i.e. with communications in general. It would also be wise to double-check your communications before sending them off. Your mind is especially inquisitive, when learning, short trips, and other forms of communication and making connections, appeal strongly.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

This is favorable week for hobbies, sports and competitive exams. You display great skills that win you appreciation and bring about an opportunity to travel. Beware of a covetous and suspicious person around you who could cause misunderstanding in your personal relationships. You would be able to maintain peace and harmony at home. You try to be just and fair when making decisions, as you do your best to see both sides of an issue and be objective. Artistic self-expression is important, possibly through music, fashion and writing. People notice and admire you for your pleasant and cheerful personality.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

There will be an increase in confidence, courage and efforts at the work place. It's a great time to do something entirely new and pioneering. Discussions and ideas about finances and material security figure strongly. You may spend extra money on things that will make your life more comfortable and pleasant. Work that needs to be done in and around the home becomes a priority. You seek opportunities to boost your feeling of security and comfort. Although you like the good things of life and may spend quite a bit your innate sense of security will not permit you to go overboard to the point of extravagance. You will have the ability to build up financial reserves and resources, for this placement can bring a good deal of success in all monetary pursuits.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

There will be cordial relations among family and relatives. Friends and loved ones take priority. People at work might be surprised by your ability to assert yourself and your needs.

You don't find yourself lacking in opportunities to socialize. You are likely to enjoy a strong feeling of happiness and solidarity in friendship, or with groups of like-minded individuals. You are more peace loving than usual and slightly detached on a personal level and feeling towards religion is enhanced. Examining the past in order to improve the future is certainly worthwhile, as long as you don't expend energy without results.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

This period brings success, responsibility and maturity. Loyalty and sensitivity in your relationships are more important to you. You are especially fond of domestic life and look to the home and family. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental or nostalgic now. You may particularly value the aesthetics in and around your home during this period. If things are chaotic on the home front, you will do whatever you can to create a peaceful and stable atmosphere. You might explore various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain this week.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

This phase is good for money, family, status and happiness. More loving relationships with your children may also figure now. Your magnetism skyrockets. Yet, you are not aggressive in your approach to love. Instead, you attract more if you allow yourself to be pursued. Creative self-expression of any kind is favored. At this time, you instinctively know how to place yourself in the best light in order to make a good impression on others. Any love affair begun now will be characterized by good cheer, having fun, and a fair share of emotions.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

Public relations work, promotion and other such endeavors are highlighted. You are looking to expand your activities, and you may find that you have a lot of energy for travel, or brand new subjects to broaden your mind. Diplomacy, correctness in manner, finesse, and charm will be a big plus in aiding financial gains, especially in areas requiring public contact. You feel attracted to intelligent people with whom you can communicate well and exchange ideas during the week. You know how to relate to others and you do it in a natural and warm manner. Your mind is especially inquisitive, when learning or establishing communications.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

This is an excellent time to create a budget or financial plan, or to rid yourself of old habits that undermine your sense of personal power and self-mastery. Spending time with someone special is a focus. Smoothing out your close personal relationships and creating stronger bonds is what makes you happy now. You pour more energy into self-promotion of business activities. It's a good time to work out money problems or other issues of sharing with a partner. You receive pleasure from anything that expands your horizons, both physically and mentally. Foreign places may particularly appeal now. Dealing with one situation at a time releases some tension and anxiety.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

Conflicts with a partner over values or personal possessions are likely to occur. There may be the need to revisit old, pending issues regarding personal finances. Take this time to re-budget instead of making premature purchases. Hold off on decision-making regarding money; instead, take the time to re-think your sources of income and how you spend your cash during this period. Put off finalizing anything important for the time being. In fact, some money-making ideas or ventures may be put on hold due to circumstances beyond your control.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

It's a generous, pleasantly emotional and creative time. You will enjoy artistic, musical, or cultural events and activities. This is a good time to promote harmony and good will on the job. You have good team spirit right now, and you are more tactful and obliging with your co-workers. You need the energies, companionship, and support of other people, and they may also seek out your support and companionship. You have an increased interest in your own possessions. You are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort, status and luxury.

Logistics as Career Option

By Ranjan K Baruah

We are publishing about an option which is yet to be popular in the region. Well, logistics is generally the detailed organization and implementation of a complex operation. In a general business sense, logistics is the management of the flow of things between the point of origin and the point of consumption in order to meet requirements of customers or corporations. The resources managed in logistics can include physical items such as food, materials, animals, equipment, and liquids; as well as abstract items, such as time and information. The logistics of physical items usually involves the integration of information flow, material handling, production, packaging, inventory, transportation, warehousing, and often security.

Logistics management is the part of supply chain management that plans, implements, and controls the efficient, effective forward, and reverse flow and storage of goods, services, and related information between the point of origin and the point of consumption in order to meet customer's requirements. The complexity of logistics can be modeled, analyzed, visualized, and optimized by dedicated simulation software. The minimization of the use of resources is a common motivation in all logistics fields. A professional working in the field of logistics management is called a logistician.

Logistician focuses on planning and forecasting, purchasing, assembling the product, moving, storing and keeping track of a product as it flows toward you and other consumers. A logistic manager is responsible for collaborating with the other officers of the company such as purchasing officers, transport and warehouse managers, to ensure that the goods produced by the company are received in the company's depot on time.

Several educational institutions in India are imparting courses in Logistics. These courses are offered generally in part-time mode, at the diploma, certificate, postgraduate degree and post graduate diploma levels. Some courses offered includes Advance Diploma in Logistics Management, Advanced Diploma in Logistics and Shipping, Advanced Certificate in Supply



Representational image

Chain Management, Certificate course in Supply Chain Management, Diploma in Logistics and Shipping, Diploma in Logistics and Transport, Diploma in Retail Supply Chain Management, Post Graduate Diploma in Logistics Management (P.G.D.L.M.), there are degree and post graduate degree specialized on logistics or supply chain management.

Logistics is a huge field with tremendous opportunities for talented and energetic future managers in India as well as abroad.

(The author is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at bkranjank@gmail.com or 8473943734 for any career related queries)

Scholarships update

NEC Scholarships: The North Eastern Council (NEC) under the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, Government of India invites applications for NEC Merit Scholarship for Students of NER 2020-21 from students pursuing diploma/degree/postgraduate/MPhil/PhD programmes. The scholarship aims at providing financial aid to students of North-Eastern Region undergoing studies in various disciplines at a recognized Indian institution. The students will receive a stipend of up to INR 30,000 per annum. Aspirants may apply on or before 20th January.

Saksham: All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) invites applications for AICTE-Saksham Scholarship Scheme 2020-21 from differently-abled students pursuing technical degree/diploma courses from recognized institutions. The students who are already availing this scholarship can also apply for renewal of the same. The aim of this scholarship is to promote technical education by offering financial assistance to specially-abled students for continuation of their professional studies. The students will be awarded INR 50,000 per annum and other benefits.

Scholarships for Single Girl Child: University Grants Commission is inviting applications for the Post-Graduate Indira Gandhi Scholarship for Single Girl Child 2020-21 from girl students of up to 30 years. The scholarship aims to promote girl education and reimburse for the direct costs of girl education to all levels. Aspirants may apply on or before 20th January.

Ishan Uday: The University Grants Commission (UGC) under MHRD, Government of India invites applications for the Special Scholarship Scheme Ishan Uday for NER 2020-21 from XII passed students of North-Eastern Region. The scholarship aims to promote higher education and increase GER (Gross Enrollment Ratio) in the North-Eastern Region. Under this program, 10,000 fresh scholarships are awarded every year. Aspirants may apply before 20th January.

"The individual who says it is not possible should move out of the way of those doing it."

--- Tricia Cunningham

The Shillong Times

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Behind prohibition

IN a curious case reported from Bihar, police is quoted as saying a bootlegger sold liquor worth Rs nine lakh per day for a long time in capital Patna until his arrest three days ago. This, clearly, was just one instance. Liquor is flowing almost everywhere in the state. The implementation of the liquor ban in the state started on April Fools' Day in 2016, as decided by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. This proved to be a foolish act as bootlegging became a lucrative business in the state, resorted to by gangs controlled from behind by powerful politicians and police officials at local levels. A similar scenario prevailed in Gujarat for many years. Gujarat, flushed with cash, turned out to be the state with the largest consumption of liquor even as the official prohibition order was in force for decades. Liquor is easily available all over the state via backdoor channels ever since prohibition was imposed on the state in 1960. Prohibition is in force also in Mizoram, Nagaland and Lakshadweep where liquor flow is heavy as long as a person can afford it. The result is that the exchequer loses precious earnings from this business while vested interests laugh their way to the bank making a killing out of this illegal business.

That addiction to liquor is harming family life is well understood. Ordinary families where men earn small incomes are deeply hurt if the money finds its way to liquor shops. While controls might be in order, as in every other case, a total prohibition is invitation to bootlegging. Social mores are changing. Fifty years ago, life was different, socialization limited, and individual concentration on family life heavy. Yet, whether one likes it or not, liquor is integral to the success of the tourism sector. Social drinking is a norm with the upper crusts of the society. Family get-togethers and kitty parties are now essential parts of social life. Under the circumstances, a total prohibition ends up depriving the state of much needed revenue via excise duty while bootleggers, politicians and others make big money through wrong channels. Nitish Kumar managed to get the support of women in Bihar by resorting to prohibition in the state. When almost every other state manages the scenario without such a ban, a question would arise as to why Bihar or Gujarat or two states in the North-East alone should act differently. Who gains from this is evident, yet again, from the Bihar report. This arrest is just the tip of the iceberg and fresh proof of the total mess-up in liquor policy.

MDA reaching the halfway mark

By HH Mohrmen

The MDA government has crossed the halfway mark on its journey to complete the five year term in office but there is much left to be desired. Till date, there is very little that the Government can show on its report card. This Government has done precious little in improving the existing projects and schemes like road construction, improving education or even health care. The roads continue to be in a bad shape and even National Highways are in a deplorable condition. The condition of the schools has not improved as most schools buildings are in a dilapidated condition and the less we speak about the state of public health system in Meghalaya the better.

The NGT ban on coal mining and transportation of coal since April 2014 which as claimed had affected the economy of the state and the livelihoods of the people was lifted by the Supreme Court, on certain conditions but the MDA government has not been able to bring the change required to allow mining and transportation of coal from the state as expected. The NGT coal mining ban was in fact the main issue that led to the dismal performance of the Congress in Meghalaya in the last election to the assembly and it is also the issue that catapulted the NPP to the fore, yet the election promises are becoming empty rhetoric. When the court finally lifted the ban in the early part of July 2019, the MDA government was found sleeping on the issue even after the lapse of many years.

Justice Ashoke Bhushan and K M Joseph lifted the five year ban with a caveat that the State Government has to comply with. The Court order said that the ban is lifted subject to the State Government's compliance with provisions of the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 and Mineral Concession Rules, 1960. Recognising the unique land tenure system prevailing in the State, the Court ruled that permission from the land owners is also required before mining is done. The Court also stated that the State is to hand over

the illegally extracted coal to Coal India Limited which will then make public auction of 'the supposed' extracted coal. While it is an open secret that the coal extracted before the NGT ban become effective in April 2014 had exhausted in the first two exemptions allowed by the NGT, the 1.77 lakhs metric tonnes of extracted coal claimed by the coal mining lobby is stretching the limit too far. How can so much of the extracted coal remain in the dumping yard for more than five years?

The truth is that the MDA Government under the leadership of Conrad Sangma is not interested in seeing the issue of mining ban reaching its logical conclusion. If the Government was serious in tackling this issue for good, then what takes it so long to even hand over the 'extracted coal' to CIL? Is it because it is difficult to come up with the numbers that have been claimed before the Supreme Court? During his last visit to East Jaintia Hills, the leader of the opposition Dr Mukul Sangma had categorically stated that coal that is being collected is freshly mined and obviously not extracted since before April 2014 as claimed.

Conrad Sangma wishes to be remembered as the Chief Minister who has done so much to protect the environment of the state but at the same time continues to turn a blind eye while coal mining is being done illegally. The Chief Minister did not realise that if coal mining continues then the entire tourism project that the government is promoting will go down the drain as mining will ultimately destroy the environment. Perhaps the Chief Minister does not realise that the Sahksaw tourism project at Chamcham village he visited recently is popular because the water quality on this part of the river Myntdu has improved due to the mining ban since 2014. Many locations which have the potential to be promoted as tourist spots, provide employment to the people in the area and are sustainable, have come up even in East Jaintia hills but if mining continues to be

unregulated then all these efforts made by the people will become a futile exercise.

But what is obvious is the fact that the Government has not been able to even come up with a policy or any kind of document to provide a blue print on how the activity is to be carried out. Nothing has been done to spell out how coal mining in the State will be done in the future. People have the right to ask the Government why this delay is being done on purpose. The current situation is best suited for those in power to illegally transport coal to Assam on a regular basis. It is reported in the media that coal being transported to Assam is not only via Guwahati but through Malidior too.

The illegal transportation of coal is being reported in the media on a regular basis and the question that begs the answer is how can this happen in broad daylight and that too on the National Highways in the state. The coal trucks in the guise of trucks carrying cement and clinkers are transporting coal without any hassle. So the question is - who are people involved in the business? In Jaintia hills the story that does the round is now only 'hai label' (the high level) people are involved in the transportation of coal from the coal mine areas. The 'high level' people are those alleged to have close connections with those in power. Perhaps this is the reason why this Government is looking the other side while coal is being transported illegally from the state. People who do not have the right connections are being left out. It remains to be seen what the outcome will be in the near future. What is obvious is that the MDA is no different from the NDA because while it receives its power from the people its service is for the rich and the mighty only.

The other issue that troubles the MDA government is the problem of who gets the contract for Government projects. In the previous Congress-led government, people complained that quality of government work is compromised because there is strong and open contractor - government nexus. Construction of

roads, bridges and government buildings are pathetic because of this nexus. However in this Government this nexus is being done away with as the people in the government are themselves contractors. The CM who is the leader of the Government should ensure that there should not be a clash of interests and those who are in the Government should refrain from engaging in such activities. But in Meghalaya the legislators themselves or their near and dear ones are engaged in government contract works.

How can we expect Government officials who are supposed to supervise the work to do their job properly, if the contractor is related to someone in the Government? Sub-standard work in road or building construction is because people in the Government or their relatives are themselves contractors. How can one expect a Government official to perform their duties well when the contractor is the MLA/ the MDC themselves or are person(s) who have connections with the high and mighty in the Government? Very often officials are forced to toe the contractor's line to avoid getting transferred to Garo Hills. Take for instance the condition of the Jowai-Shillong road which has been repaired very recently. Why is the road in a pathetic condition?

The other issue that this Government has failed to address is the smuggling of cattle to Bangladesh. The Border Security Force who are supposed to man the borders are now becoming cattle herders too, but the most important question is how did those hundreds of cattle reach the border? How come the trucks carrying these cattle from Assam pass through the highways to reach the border without being detected? Obviously in this case too, the State machineries have failed and the customs officials and the BSF have to bear the brunt.

No doubt last year has been a challenging year for everybody, but the performance of the MDA government in the State also leaves much to be desired.

Email: hhmohrmen67@gmail.com

Post pandemic Budget expectations

By Ajit Ranade

The annual Union Budget will be presented in less than two weeks. It is a constitutional requirement, since not even a single rupee can be spent from the exchequer without Parliament's permission. The discussion and debate around the budget proposals might be heated, but given the majority of the ruling party, the passage of the budget proposals is a given. The upper house of parliament does not have any effective veto over the passage of the finance bill. Most of the budget-related measures and initiatives are probably frozen by now. Even then it is worth speculating what they might be.

The budget is being presented under fairly unusual circumstances. It is the first time in forty years, that a budget is being presented after a recession, i.e. when the national income has contracted. The expectation is that in real terms, GDP for the fiscal year 2020-21 fell by around 8 percent, and in nominal terms by around 4 percent. In normal times, of positive GDP growth, budgeting is done mostly as an extrapolation of the previous year. That is not to say, that completely new, and radical measures cannot be contemplated. But most projections and proposals on an aggregate basis are

loan repayments. So quite counterintuitively, the non-performing asset ratio of banks has improved in the September ending quarter. But the day of reckoning is not far. When the moratorium period is over, and this issue is currently stuck in the Supreme Court, then the NPA ratio might jump. Additionally, as indicated by the K V Kamath committee report, there are 26 sectors undergoing stress, and those loans, cumulatively worth 48 trillion need restructuring, so that they are not classified as non-performing loans. As indicated by the RBI report, if the bad loan ratio rises to 12 percent, it would call for at least a 2 trillion-rupee injection by the Central government into public sector banks. This capital injection is necessary to support loan and credit growth to the rest of the economy. If the economy has to grow at 7 or 8 percent, then bank credit must grow at 15 to 20 percent, which means there has to be adequate banking capital to support such loan growth.

The Union Budget has to provide for this banking capital. Of course, it can also be raised by privatisation. All the distributed bank ownership can be consolidated in a holding super-company, which can invite up to 75 percent private investment. This is



increments over the previous year. Thus, if nominal GDP grows by around 12 percent, then tax growth is budgeted at say 18 to 20 percent and so on. For next year's budget such increments to base line are not likely nor are they appropriate. If anything, the finance minister is likely to pay little attention to the size of the fiscal deficit. Growth stimulus and employment generation are the highest priorities. This means that the aggregate budget size could be as high as rupees 36 trillion, or about 20 percent higher than last year's budget size. In turn the size of the deficit, which is also the size of aggregate borrowing could be as high as 12 trillion, or about 6 percent of the GDP.

Two areas where the Central government needs to put more resources in the coming fiscal year, are in infrastructure and banking. Just a few months before last year's lockdown, the finance minister had unveiled the national infrastructure pipeline, a collection of over 7000 projects aggregating 111 trillion rupees of spending over a period of five years: Of course, bulk of the spending will be from the private sector, both domestic and foreign. It will be a combination of equity and debt financing. That translates to roughly 22 trillion rupees to be spent every year. Surely at least 10 to 15 percent of that should come via government sources, whether financed through sovereign infrastructure bonds or as directly provided seed money. Thus, the budget should make a provision of no less than 2 to 3 trillion rupees toward infrastructure.

The second area is that of banking. The recent financial stability report published by the Reserve Bank of India, gives a very sobering picture of bank capital requirement. During the lockdown phase the regulator has shown much forbearance. We have had a moratorium and a standstill on the recognition of failed

not as radical as it sounds, and indeed has been suggested by several committees. By privatising the holding company, the government can save some budgetary outgo. And by letting each public sector bank, which would become a subsidiary of the apex company, run by their respective boards, it will also improve the governance in those banks.

Apart from the two obvious big commitments on infra and banking, there is a plethora of asks, from various sectors, such as healthcare, startups, renewable energy, education and skilling, rural employment guarantee and so on. In particular, after the experience of the pandemic, surely India's healthcare spending by the public sector must at least double to around 6 trillion rupees. If the vaccination is going to be provided free to all, as was promised before the Bihar elections, then that would mean an aggregate burden of at least 2 trillion rupees. Covering 500 million people with vaccines in about 18 months will be a herculean task. But not only will this be a huge confidence booster for business and consumers, it will also prove to be a de facto fiscal stimulus.

Beyond these big initiatives, there are committed expenditures such as interest payments on past debt (about 6 trillion rupees), food and fertiliser subsidies (3 trillion rupees), military spending including the OROP pension cost (6 trillion). That leaves very little room for game-changing ideas or radical departures from the past. Perhaps this will be seen on the revenue side. Maybe floating a Covid bond or a sovereign dollar bond to raise resources? Or a gold amnesty scheme to unlock part of the huge hoard in the country? We will find out soon enough!

(Dr. Ajit Ranade is an economist and Senior Fellow, Takshashila Institution) (Syndicate: The Billion Press) (email: editor@thebillionpress.org)

TO THE EDITOR

PIL against ILP & MRSSA justified

Editor,

When politicians resort to discriminatory policies recklessly without considering wider social and economic ramifications then PIL is the only recourse left for the hapless citizen to assert his or her individual right. The PIL against entry registration is the need of the hour and the govt of Meghalaya will have to do a lot of answering in the days to come. Merely shifting the merit of the case to the 'wisdom' of the court will not help. The wisdom of all 60 MLAs who supported the bill will be tested before the nation. The fact that not a single MLA voted against such a draconian law, which is constitutionally invalid as it infringes citizens' rights in more than one way, is disappointing to say the least. Has the Government ever thought how much harassment is inflicted on travelers coming to the state ever since the gates became functional? Passengers are asked to apply online and provide details which are personal in nature. Does the government consider every individual who enters the state as tech savvy or internet literate? What

about farmers, housewives, grandmothers, and petty business traders who barely know how to read or write or speak properly? How many individuals have smart phones for that matter? Has the Government distributed mobile phone or internet connection or digital literacy free of cost to enforce the form filling process? As per people who recently visited Shillong, the officers manning the gate are seldom assisting travelers to fill the form and instead asking people to download tourism app and fill it themselves. Weren't they supposed to be facilitators in the first place? This is indeed ridiculous and unacceptable!

Chinese philosopher Confucius once said that there were three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest. The PIL will surely test the wisdom of the Government via the third route. In this regard, several pertinent questions are bound to arise. For example, why does the Meghalaya Government see Indian citizens as a threat if they enter the state freely? What is the rationale to bring in a law similar to ILP which has already been rejected by the Centre? Why disclosure of information at the entry and

exit points should not be seen as state surveillance and violating right to privacy? Where is the evidence/study to suggest large scale influx/foreigners in Meghalaya? Why entry/exit gates were built on interstate borders rather than closer to the international border?

The Constitution of India has given enough privileges to the state and it is a fact that Meghalaya is not fully covered under the Sixth Schedule. But the Sixth Schedule is certainly, not above fundamental rights and the Constitution of India. Moreover Meghalaya is a transitory state through which goods pass onto neighbouring states. The Government has to be prepared with the answers before the hearing commences in February. Until then, hope better sense prevails and the law is revoked sooner than later.

Yours etc.,
Bhaskar D,
Via email

Truth transcends Right & Left

Editor

I appreciate the fact that Mr. Nongrum read my prior letter and responded to it in ST, Jan 16, 2021. I continue to respectfully disagree with him. I think we have different

definitions of individual and systemic racism. Mine are intertwined and nuanced.

The case of George Floyd was not just individual racism as Mr. Nongrum asserts, but a culmination of strongly entrenched systemic racism within police forces in America. But this does not mean a denial of free-will as the Left often claims. I am against any denial of free-will or of personal responsibility. The cop who killed Floyd is squarely to blame for his action. Yes to this extent his act was a case of individual racism. Yet, individual racism does not stand in a vacuum, but is embedded within larger forms of systemic racism. It is utterly naive to deny the systemic racism that contaminates US police forces. It is equally naive to deny personal responsibility or free-will.

To say that because laws exist everyone has equal opportunity, is to be out of touch with reality in today's America. It is also unkind to the living experience of everyday pain and fear in the African American community. For example: Indian laws prohibit many malpractices of Indian culture, including child marriage etc. Does this wash away the causal impact of the systemic character of petrified cultural practices? So free-will and individuality

are intertwined with larger cultural practices.

Good laws alone cannot change individual actions, precisely because we have free-will. Besides, not all laws are moral, either in theory or in how they are applied. It is in how they are applied that many laws in the USA display systemic racism. This was one of the points Dr. King made in his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Mr. Nongrum perhaps assumes that just because a law is just it will be applied equally and fairly to everyone. This is simply not the case. Such unjust applications are another sign of systemic racism in US police actions.

To sum up: I think individual racism and systemic racism are deeply intertwined. Individual racism is embedded within systemic racism and systemic racism is executed by individual racists. So free-will matters. Moreover, to think everything all the time is due to systemic racism is indeed a way of denying personal responsibility and free-will. It is also a paranoid projection of one's own mind onto the world. Systemic racism should never be defined by denying individual free-will. That said, individual actions (good or bad) do not stand in a vacuum.

As for Black Lives Matter

(BLM) and their tactics, to some extent they were infiltrated by those who try to discredit them. Many BLM protests were peaceful. For any that were not, indeed the means used (as Gandhiji said) determine the moral worth of the ends. Moreover, as Mr. Nongrum said, racism cannot quell racism. Two wrongs do not make a right. But again, it is too idealistic to expect BLM or any movement to be perfect. In the real world protest movements are messy -- morally and practically. The bottom-line is that it takes a lot of courage to confront racism in America. I admire those activists who are doing so ethically, and at the risk of their lives. Because white supremacists (Mr. Nongrum does not mention them) are dead serious in their violence.

So my stance is not as black-and-white, but more nuanced -- hopefully thereby also more objective. I am leery of Right and Left. I see them as two arcs on two sides of Conscience, both missing the true balance of Conscience. I think more truthful (hence nuanced) positions transcend both Right and Left. Racism, whether systemic or individual remains a sin and sometimes a crime.

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar
Via email

"Good judgement comes from experience. Sometimes, experience comes from bad judgement."

— Christian Slater

The Shillong Times

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Media trial contemptuous

ON Monday January 18, the Bombay High Court has specifically spelt out that media trials during the investigation of any case, violates programme code under the Cable TV Network Regulation Act and tends to influence an ongoing probe. The Court order says that the Press Council of India (PCI) guidelines will apply to the electronic media along with print media until such time as the electronic media frames its own guidelines. The Court was responding to Public Interest Litigations (PILs) filed by former police officials, activists, lawyers and NGOs in the aftermath of the Sushant Singh Rajput suicide which a section of television media had claimed was murder. The same media then conducted a media trial against certain individuals that were close to the deceased actor and vilified them relentlessly.

The Court held that trial by media has the potential to interfere with the criminal justice system even while it pointed out the names of two television channels and said what they did was "prima facie contemptuous." However, the Court has for now refrained from initiating action against the channels. What also came within the remit of the Court is the failure of the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB) to take necessary action on media channels that have exceeded their brief. The Court observed that the MIB had "abdicated statutory functions" by restraining channels that went overboard in their reportage of the Sushant Singh Rajput death case.

The Court observed that media should avoid putting photographs of victims and accused and said that reconstruction of a crime scene has the potential to adversely influence investigations. Last years a slew of PILs had come up seeking injunctions against certain media houses that had taken upon themselves the onus of an investigation agency and even hounded witnesses. The Court had also questioned the Central Government as to why it should not frame guidelines on media coverage of sensitive criminal matters and ongoing investigations, and whether "excessive" reporting by the press amounted to interference in the administration of justice under the Contempt of Courts Act.

The Sushant Singh Rajput death case was unprecedented in scale as far as media hype and hoopla over it was concerned. The hype was intended to influence the Bihar elections last year. Interestingly, the matter suddenly died down once the elections were over. Reason being that Rajput was from Bihar and the BJP had sought to gain brownie points from the episode. The Court reminded all of the dictum - right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty - which it said was grossly violated by the media which conducts its own trials, thereby prejudicing the case. It's a timely reminder to the media to interrogate its own actions.

Is Matrilineal Lineage under question?

By Albert Thyriani

Eric Clapton, the British musician and singer, was the son of Patricia Molly Clapton and Edward Walter Fryer. He took his mother's surname. Ryan Giggs, one of Manchester United's best midfielders ever was born Ryan Joseph Wilson but legally adopted his mother's surname. Edie Adams, an American actress and singer was born Edith Elizabeth Enke but later decided to take her mother's maiden name. Wikipedia has a long list of people in the West who have matrilineal surnames having defied the old-aged tradition for different reasons.

In patriarchal India too there are people who choose their mother's surname. There are some who take both father's and mother's surname. There are parents who include also the mother's family name in the names of their offsprings. Tennis star Sania Mirza and Pakistani Cricketer Shoaib Malik have named their first son Ishaan Mirza Malik.

Obviously in the conservative sub-continent people who choose their mother's surname do not get societal approval. In 2015 the Facebook page, "Humans of Bombay" narrates the story of how a girl who went against the norm by adding her mother's middle name often got her into trouble in school and college for not being normal. She justifies, "Both parents have an equal part in bringing up children, so why should only the father's name be used in their identity?" Netizens who agree with her laud her for challenging stereotypes.

Meghalaya is a matrilineal society. The two major tribes, the Khasis and the Garos follow the matrilineal lineage system in which the family name and ancestral property is passed on through the female line of descent. Among the world's 500 matrilineal societies the Ki Hynniew Trep and the Achik tribes (3 million) are said to be one of the largest surviving matrilineal cultures in the world. The Minangs in Indonesia with a population of over 4 million are perhaps the largest tribe that are akin to us. In India we could pride ourselves as the only practitioners of matrilineal as the social custom was terminated by law among the Nairs of Kerala in 1925.

The latest discussion on matrilineal was propelled by the notification of the Social Welfare Department on November 17, 2020 reportedly directing the Deputy Commissioners (DCs) of

East Khasi Hills and West Khasi Hills to expedite the applications for Schedule Tribe (ST) certificates including those who have assumed the father's surname. This led to a row with organisations and individuals rebuking the minister and the government for daring to go against the time-immemorial custom practice that has become a law via the Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Act, 1997. The incident is deemed fit for the MDA government to be accused of demolishing the foundation of the matrilineal social system. The Social Welfare Minister Kyrmen Shylla had to clarify that his Department's letter was not a diktat to the concerned authorities to issue ST certificates to the 'father descent' applicants but simply to remind DCs to process all applications expeditiously.

In 1990 the Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai (SRT) was founded to impress upon all to do away with patriliney and establish patriliney in the Khasi society. Claiming that patriliney is not working SRT has been advocating equitable distribution of property to all children, male and female. Changing a system that dates centuries back is looked at with disdain. A story is told of an incident in 1961 when women chased three-dozen men with knives in Cherrapunjee market for proposing that patriliney should replace matriliney. Members of SRT and those who favour change say matriliney has failed. It gives no identity to men. Men are not owners in the in-laws' dwellings. They don't belong. They are basically suffragettes. They become irresponsible. This leads to broken families, alarming instances of single mothers, economics instability and drunkenness among males.

The issue to be highlighted here is whether ST certificates can be denied to individuals who take their father's surname. No doubt the 2005 gazetted KHAD (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Act, 1997 is in place. An amendment to the Act may be introduced in the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council soon to give more teeth to the Act. But will the Act stand the test of time? More importantly will it stand legal scrutiny? If someone goes to court (it looks likely) the Act may collapse. A custom is voluntary and temporary. It is not legally binding and permanent. Many customs that were once considered sacrosanct have gone out of use. There have been already pre-

cedents of Khasis taking their father's title. Were they not issued ST certificates? Do not past actions impact the present? It might even be possible that MDCs who directly or indirectly benefited from decisions of the past might be debating on the proposed amendment and may strongly advocate for preserving the matrilineal practice at all cost. It does not look fair to the present generation.

Article 21 of the Indian constitutions guarantees personal liberty to all citizens. There might have been no court judgement. But it is presumed personal liberty includes the right and freedom to choose any of the parents' surname. Meghalaya is under the Sixth Schedule which is governed by ADCs. But can personal liberty be exempted in Scheduled Areas? How can one be denied an ST certificate and be branded as 'non-Khasi' just because he decides to inherit the father's clan name? If a court declares that choosing father's surname is part of Article 21, what will become of KHAD (Khasi Social Custom of Lineage) Act? ST certificates have to be issued to all tribal applicants.

One word about the 'Kur' and 'Kha'. The trait has also been undergoing changes. In the western part of Khasi Hills 'lashingiat' was forbidden. For example, the Thyriani males marry Marwien females. The Thyriani clan (Kur) are 'Kha' and Marwien clan is 'Kun'. It was a taboo for a Marwien to marry a Thyriani. But recently there have been cases where males from the Marwien clan have been given in marriage to Thyriani clan. So now 'Kha' are 'Kun' and 'Kun' are also 'Kha'. Some of my female relatives are married to Myrthong men. Thyriani men have also married Myrthong women from a different 'kpho'. What was once a taboo now has been normalised. Life adjusts itself. Eventually, probably provided the rule of the country (and the Church) are kept alive we have to adapt to changes.

Within the 'Thongni clan' there are the ThongniRit, Thongni Bah and ThongniLong. These three clans intermarry with each other. Probably once upon a time marriage within the 'Thongni clan' was prohibited. Someone defiled the ban giving way to 'three sub clans' to emerge.

It is told the Tiwa or Lalung were once a matrilineal

tribe. But today the ethnographic group has become a patrilineal society. Though many matrilineal features disappeared they have not lost their identity.

The Khasis being a matrilineal tribe are no doubt unique. We take pride in the rarity of matriliney. But does it mean we tolerate no deviation? Just as in patriliney individuals inherit the mother's surname, should we not permit it to be the other way round here? The majority still want the uniqueness to be preserved but minority may desire a change. Should they be shunted? Should they be ostracised? Should they be denied ST certificates? Should they be deprived of reservations and quotas? Should they benefit no scholarship? Should they fall under the general category for jobs, employment and admissions in schools, colleges and institutes?

It is imperative to note that the Khasi tribe is matrilineal and not matriarchal. The decision makers at all levels are not women but men. Women are not heads of the family. Uncles, at least in rural areas, are influential in the family. The headman and his executive members in the Dorbar are men. Heads of clan lands (Lyngdoh) are men. Ki Dolloi are men. Ki Syiem (chieftains) and members of his council are men. The land may belong to women but the 'governors' are men. In the modern democratic set up men dominate all institutions. There are hardly any women Members in the District Councils (MDCs) and Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs). All leaders of NGOs and pressure groups are men and views of women are unsolicited. Therefore, is matrilineal only a name, while the practice and outlook is patriarchal?

It is ironical that women have little to say on preserving the system of which they are supposed to be the custodians. They are in the backseat striving to keep the foundation of the society of which they should be at the forefront. To preserve the unique matrilineal system women leadership has to be promoted by reforming all traditional institutions. Otherwise the essence of matriliney is missing. A matrilineal society sans empowerment of women is meaningless. In the meantime proponents of patriliney may have a valid point that might ultimately be heard in court and subsequently by the government and the whole society. Email: thalbert@rediffmail.com

The wisdom of hindsight

By T P Sreenivasan

The wisdom of hindsight flowing out of all sections of US public opinion after January 6th is astounding. The latest discovery is that "It is not a mystery how we got here." It took them four years to see where America was heading and there were many opportunities to change the course. The whole world, which had no say in the matter of either electing Donald Trump or ousting him, kept hoping that a mature democracy would have its own mechanisms to correct the mistake of electing him by either changing his ways through the various checks and balances in the American system of governance or removing him. But he was allowed to behave like a bull in a china shop, as though the broken artefacts would not make any difference to the polity or the people. Today, after all the damage is done, America is running helter-skelter to bury him deep to forget the nightmare.

Why the US did not have the foresight to see the fire and the flood engulfing it till January 6th is indeed a mystery. The election campaign in 2016 itself was a disaster, with Trump's personality on display, revealing himself as a businessman who was offering himself to lead the US and the world. It was no secret that his motivation to contest was to acquire the only thing he had not enjoyed—political power. He enjoyed the power of money, the power of masculinity and the power of media, and what remained was the power of running the US government without any experience of managing even a municipality. He made no secret of his ambitions, but everyone trusted the judgement of the US not to hand the country over to such a person. Everyone sat back predicting that he would lose, a wish rather than a calculation.

Unnoticed by the intelligentsia, Trump slowly built his own constituency, not through the Republican Party, but through white supremacists, disgruntled elements, domestic terrorists and blind believers who thought that Trump was their destiny to make America great again. Most people did not see that what he wanted was to make himself great by any means. The Republicans stood by him to keep the illusion of party unity even after the House of Representatives had impeached him. Not a single Republican in the House had voted against him. Now, with the wisdom of hindsight, at least 10 Republican members of the House have voted against him, but the Senators are still wondering what to do when a former president comes up for conviction and possible disqualification from running for public office.

A democracy is meaningful only if it has the capacity not only to elect its leaders but also to recall them when they are found to be wanting in the qualities expected of them. The elaborate procedure for impeachment set out in the US Constitution is well thought-out, with the necessary safeguards. What was required was the judgment beyond party considerations to save the country from a harmful president. The 25th Amendment, enacted after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, was devised to meet the contingency of keeping a president in office even after he had lost the capability of performing his duties. The US Congress could not have been unaware of the fact that Trump had lost the ability to govern within months of the election of 2016. There were protests about Russian intervention in the elections even when Trump was being sworn in. That allegation was more serious

than all the charges that Trump has made about Biden stealing the election. The subsequent investigation indicated that the Russian role was real, strengthened by the fact that Trump paid extraordinary obedience to Putin at their first meeting.

The world was aghast at Trump's attitude towards his most valuable allies. NATO was in tatters, Canada was humiliated, and he went on to woo China and North Korea with no apparent benefit to the US. He walked out of carefully crafted international agreements without finding any alternatives. The world had faith in the resilience of American democracy to expect that he would be either corrected or removed before he turned the world upside down. The political parties in the US have only themselves to blame for closing their eyes to the US losing its leadership of the world. In a rather strange way, the world passed a no-confidence motion on Trump when the whole UN General Assembly burst into laughter when he claimed in an address that he was the best president the US had ever had. Trump himself was taken aback by the unanimous judgment on him and even stated that he had not expected such a reaction. But what was more surprising was that the American public took no notice of the global condemnation of their president.

Even if we give the benefit of doubt to US public opinion that it did not have any evidence of the president's wayward ways, the massive literature generated by people who knew him intimately like Mary L. Trump, his niece, a trained psychologist, who diagnosed his sickness and called him the "World's Most Dangerous Man", should have convinced the reading public to make a judgment.

There were equally damaging writings about Trump and his ways. Peter Oborne and Tom Roberts published soon after the inauguration, an anthology of Trump's bird-brained tweets. Tim Alberta's American Carnage exposed the Republican Party's surrender to Trump's hostile takeover of their party and how it struck 'a deal with the devil'. Michael Wolff's Fire and Fury revealed that there was complicity between Trump and journalists: 'Trump wants publicity, the hacks want copy: the two sides have a smelly mutual dependency, and no one escapes unbesmirched.' Ben Fountain brooded about an ideal America that Trump had defiled and debased, perhaps irreparably.

If all these were not enough to wake up lawmakers, the reckless and callous attitude Trump adopted towards the coronavirus through acts of omission and commission should have got him an Article 25 ouster. He is now leaving a legacy of thousands of Americans deaths, still surging. Perhaps, Trump would have won the election if there were no pandemic, but the election defeat is not adequate punishment for the dance of death we are still witnessing in the US. It was much worse than the armed insurrection allegedly staged to overturn the election results.

It took the Republicans a massive attack on Capitol Hill and five deaths, incited by a serving president, to take action against Trump. With the wisdom of hindsight, they are regretting that they did not act earlier to stop the carnage of lives, livelihoods and the loss of international prestige. Trump had openly incited violence from the day of the election and there was no secret that he exhorted his supporters to go to Capitol Hill to prevent the joint session of Congress from certifying the results. The writer is a former diplomat. Email: tpsreenivasan@gmail.com

TO THE EDITOR

Much ado about restrictions

Editor,
I had recently gone out of station for some work and would like to state my observation on the scenario as regards the Covid situation. While at the airport, before boarding the plane, proper safety kits were given to protect ourselves from the virus but when seating was done, it became a joke as we were squashed up literally breathing into each other's space (Economy class of course, I'm not of the elite group). When we deplaned, there was none to restrict our movements. The shops and bazaars were bustling with activity, some with masks, most not, it was a jolt to realize that our government here has created a sort of unrealistic bubble which has, in turn, hampered the free movement of its citizens.

However, in spite of this stringent restriction of testing at the entry point, many returnees have skipped this by having their loved ones pick them up and thus, avoiding the testing there, preferring to do so in the city where it's more reliable. While lauding the government for its endeavour to check the spread of the disease, I wish that some of these unrealistic restrictions

be lifted so that common people like us aren't unnecessarily taxed after our long and tiring journeys.

Yours etc.,
Angela Lyngdoh
Shillong -14

Our craze for social media

Editor,
Free services always have some strings attached. So don't boast of having accounts on Facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Google, Instagram etc. Besides their social utilities and academic, informative and communicative values, these social media portals can also be addictive and sometimes make us go crazy looking for 'likes' on our posts. They prod us in every possible way into shedding all our inhibitions. Have they not been pouncing upon all our five senses -- the complete mirror that reflects what we truly look like? These service providers now know our likes and dislikes and what turns us on, sometimes more than we know ourselves. They keep all the records. They keep track of what makes us giggle, what worries us; how we have jumped in excitement and what all interests us. Do we know last year, this hour and this minute which all keys we clicked? But Marc Zuckerberg, Larry Page et al know that. They have a mas-

ter plan to dive into the ocean of world-population and feel the behavioral pulses of each one of us. For this, they have also put several sophisticated systems in place. Beware, some of those social media platforms are all determined to exploit each one of us to the bone.

Please note that these popular social media tycoons prey on our weaknesses. In fact, it is just the beginning of this crazy era. Moreover, we cannot blame them because we ourselves have allowed ourselves to be preyed by these modern masters of the universe and agree to their conditions for logging in. We cannot say no to their services either. Have those portals not successfully made us taste the sweetness of the base indulgences? Those joys of gratification have already reached the deep recesses of our minds. Our psyches are overruled now by those silly thoughts of social media alone. Don't we all check our phones every 5 or 10 seconds to glance at whether another "LIKE" has been added to our posts?

Our minds hover over stupid things in a similar manner that a madman goes to the garbage can to look for things he does not know. That these "unimportant" things on social media have become so impor-

tant and so indispensable to our mental faculties is a sorry state of affairs. Our minds have become unstable these days as we lack concentration and are easily distracted by the thought of who is posting what. Have we not become indecisive and are we not losing our focus and hence our discretionary powers and moral sensibilities? We are grumpy and uncontrollably reactive and unhappy? Our short-term happiness rests on all those silly, unimportant stuff, and wrong indulgences. Without social media services, many of us feel totally at a loss.

Just see how our emotions are manipulated by Zuckerberg, Larry Page, Chad Hurley et al and they want us to be hooked on our fragility. Moreover, international laws have given them full freedom to feed on all our failings and frailties. They have successfully put all our weaknesses inside the vault of their database. What's more, this database is also "sold like goats and cows" in the secret market. It's not surprising therefore that against the backdrop of this advanced technological world, these few digital magnates have been allowed to play on our stupidity to grab wealth at our expense. To sum up, our craze for their services of boosting us with temporary dopamine and their craze for wealth will

certainly keep this modern civilization in a state of perpetual convulsion.

Yours etc.,
Salil Grewal,
Shillong

BJP versus personalities

Editor,
I have been following the goings-on in Meghalaya where the State BJP and its two MLAs seem out of sync. While the State BJP feels it is important to address the issue of corruption in the GHADC, more so because BJP spokesperson Bernard Marak has been following the case from close quarters. Many are surprised that AL Hek the MLA cum minister in the MDA Government and the verbose Sanbor Shullai who made did a filibustering act in the Assembly that he had found a cure for Covid with some idiotic explanation which later on turned out to be a joke. That the members of the State legislature laughed at what is supposed to be a very serious matter shows a distinct lack of legislative culture. The Assembly is called the "August House" because it has a sanctity in a democracy. To my mind that sanctity is violated by the likes of Sanbor Shullai who made light of a very serious virus infection that has claimed many lives. But let me get back to the

point of this write-up. Make no mistake but both AL Hek and Sanbor Shullai know that they won the last elections based on their personal popularity. They know that if they jump ship tomorrow and join the NPP they will still win the elections. Hence they are nonchalant and don't really value the philosophy of the BJP and it's Pradhan Sewak, Prime Minister, Narendra Modi who vowed to cleanse the country of corruption. It's a different matter that Modi too has been forced to patronize Ambani and Adani because every political party in India needs money to run its office and to fight elections. Hek and Shullai are both well established businessmen and their only ambition is to be with the government, no matter if its saffron, white, green or red.

People of Meghalaya vote only those that can pay them money for various purposes such as hospital fees, children's education and other needs. As long as an MLA can satisfy these basic needs he/she will continue to win. Hence it is better for an MLA if his/her constituency is populated by poor people. It's those poor people who are compelled to vote in these politician-businessmen. Yours etc.,
AN Kharkongor,
Via email

"Life isn't a matter of milestones,
but of moments."

— Rose Kennedy

The Shillong Times

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Season of hope, pride

IN the season of vaccination, optimism is high about the return of normal life to India and the wider world. With nearly five lakh inoculations done in the past three days, India is proud to have fielded two vaccines manufactured within the facilities here. The effect of these has been impressive. Minor reactions were reported in some cases, which were forewarned by medical practitioners as well as Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Two deaths, one each from UP and Karnataka, were reported by way of post-inoculation incidents. Doctors were quick to say these were not linked to the effect of the vaccine.

When millions and crores line up in phases, such instances are but natural. Bharat Biotech, one of the vaccine producers, has issued an advisory as to who should take more care before the vaccination and consult doctors. Vaccination drives in other continents too are progressing smoothly without any cause for concern. Overall, the mood today is one of optimism that the world can rein in the pandemic that brought life across the globe to a virtual standstill for weeks and months since March last.

For India, this scenario presented a great opportunity. The nation might not have made any major mark in most fields in the past three quarters of a century after Independence. But, by way of private initiative, the pharmaceutical sector and the Information Technology field have put India on a high pedestal in recent years. Successive governments had less to do with this; and these being technology-related fields, politicians' interferences — a major dampener to enterprise — were to the minimum. So is the case with Space technology too.

India is now looked upon by several nations near and far for supply of Covid-19 vaccines, and orders are flowing in. Exports would start from Wednesday. Starting with Bhutan and Bangladesh, shipments by Pune's Serum Institute, the world's largest vaccine maker, will soon be reaching Brazil and many other nations. The Pune firm is waiting for nod from WHO for start of supply to several nations. Bharat Biotech vaccines too will be allowed export. Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Nepal and the Maldives are waiting for deliveries from India. Pakistan is in a mood to turn to India.

This is bound to give a boost overall to the Indian pharmaceutical sector because of the name it earns now. Clearly, this will be a silver lining in a sky where gathering clouds have caused huge worry for the world for as long as a year now.

Meghalaya will soon turn 50: Shall we celebrate or deliberate?

By Benjamin Lyngdoh

In 12 months time Meghalaya 'the abode of clouds' will reach its 50th year. This is an important landmark and yes it is to be celebrated. However, does it have to be only about celebrations? How extensive and grand shall our celebrations be? Well, the crux of the matter is that celebrations are dependent upon achievements; else, it simply becomes a depiction of ignorance, arrogance and foolishness. Hence, as we continue to tread towards the year 2022 and 50 years of statehood let us all ask a basic question concerning 'celebration and deliberation'. As we do this, it must be factored that Meghalaya is not only about its bountiful natural resources and rich mineral resources. In fact, inherently it is about 'the people'. As such, any deliberation should focus on the well-being and development of the people and more importantly this must be the benchmark/standard for deciding on the nature and scale of our celebrations. In the process, we may turn the year 2021 into a year of deliberation on the birth of Meghalaya and the issues plaguing it for perpetuity such as unemployment, minerals mining and extraction, the deteriorating environment, conflict of interests as regards to our law-makers, demand for ILP, border conflicts with Assam, the demand for inclusion of Khasi and Garo languages into the 8th schedule of the Constitution of India, etc.

Some of the issues have been in existence for decades together (like ILP since the 1980s); border conflicts with Assam (ever since the birth of Meghalaya) with no possibility of them being solved any time soon. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that the state GDP has been increasing steadily since the 1970s and with an impressive growth rate of around 10% for the recent years 2015-16 to 2019-20. This is an important statistic as it highlights the socio-economic progress made. Moreover, it also depicts the development of the people. However, in terms of inclusive growth and equitable opportunities to excel in life; there is a lot of inequality and unhappiness. For the youth the reason for this is unemployment and the lack of gainful employment opportunities (underemployment). In fact, for many this is a bigger concern than ILP, the border issues with Assam and the 8th Schedule of the Constitution of India. Of course, we cannot expect the government to provide employment for all; but the

least it can do is to provide a nurturing environment for business and entrepreneurial activities. Here comes the need for creating effective support systems such as civil infrastructure, business incubators, technical assistance, marketing support and the all important training and development. As the saying goes regarding our villages and their development, 'Give them water and roads and they will achieve growth and progress on their own'. Yes, this is tried and tested and it works. All we need do is to look at the villages that were connected by roads in the last few years; they have

issue of unemployment amongst the youth, we also have to deal with the issue of trust on the State Government recruitment and selection processes which we all know as the MPSC. Whether the Government likes it or not, the reality today is that the people do not trust the MPSC. They see in it a lot of nepotism, push and pull, job awards and rewards in return for offers and favours. In general, many agree that it is time for MPSC to do away with the practice of conducting personal interviews as it is more of a window for backdoor/backroom arrangements. As an alternative, the

sequently, and as a result of the above we will be able to improve upon the labour force participation rate of Meghalaya which as of today stands at around 50%. In general, this means that 50% of the working age population (16-64 years) do not find any employment opportunities at all.

Now, if unemployment needs deliberation; then so does the matter of the deteriorating environment. Sometimes Meghalaya looks like a workshop of mining and extraction of mineral resources. As a case in point, just look at the degree of stone and limestone quarrying in the border areas to Bangladesh and now it has stretched up into the areas around Pynursla. Where once we would be able to experience the wonderful greenery on that route; now all we find is huge boulders on the roads with disturbing signs of continued stone quarrying towards no end. In addition, factor the continued illegal coal mining and extraction despite the NGT ban.

Well, the ground reality is that ban or no ban, coal auction or no auction, environmental rules or not; coal mining is still being carried on in Meghalaya. While we may generally see this as a simple case of illegality; in actuality, the crux of the matter is called 'conflict of interest'. It is a situation where the very people who directly/indirectly own/manage/have a stake in such mineral resources actually make Government regulations and rules (or at least oversee their drafting and implementation) concerning their extraction and business. Then of course, in this situation such leaders will lack the motivation and the will power to do what is right and accordingly see to it that regulations and rules are devised so as to suit their purpose. As such, this conflict of interest is a serious issue that needs deliberation. At best, such leaders/stakeholders that have any interest in coal and other minerals mining and extraction must be excluded from the policy making and framing the regulations and rules. However, does the state government have the guts and gumption to do it?

Indeed, the issues are just too many to fit into one article. Hence, the deliberations may continue by the society at large. As such, as we move through 2021 let us take up the issues that matter and not fall for a distraction called the national games, 2022!

E m a i l : benjamin21in@yahoo.co.in



been able to come up meaningfully through their own resourcefulness, determination and hard work. This is one beautiful phenomenon which we must deliberate upon even further.

Continuing from the above, it is true that not everyone can become an entrepreneur. Not everyone has the capacity for that. However, it is equally true that the entrepreneurs provide employment opportunities to the ones who do not have

candidates must be given a job offer on the basis of their performance in the written test. Now, as far as checking of the personality of the selected candidate is concerned that can be done on the basis of their functioning during the period of probation (be it one year or two years). This strategy is far more effective and workable. Moreover, it is fair! This is because anyone can be pleasing and intelligent for an hour of interview but

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the acumen for entrepreneurial activities. Hence, it is a win-win situation for all. It works like a multiplier effect whereby when one progresses and does well it positively impacts upon the livelihoods of the others. In addition, for dealing with the

this is a flawed measure. The real measure is to observe the candidate in question for a whole year or two. Here, we will be able to fairly assess the person and accordingly find 'the right person for the right job'. Sub-

The man who has access to state secrets and blurts them out

Fit case for NSA to order probe into chats

By Sushil Kutty

After the heady days of being a near-Neta in a Mumbai suburb, journalist-editor-in-chief-cum-media-baron-cum-ex-jailbird Arnab Goswami is now a sub-continental sensation with the extra-sensory perception to predict airstrikes across the border with some degree of perception if not precision. And if he is a close confidante of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the key to the PMO's vault in his trouser pocket, he is no friend of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan who if he was running towards Arnab would chuck a cricket ball at him so fast it would catch Arnab in the noggin and no apologies asked.

Yep, the Pakistan Government, and Prime Minister Imran Khan, have also got hold of Arnab's WhatsApp

Minister Imran Khan. Goswami is not cutting ice in Pakistan. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry has reacted, saying the chat transcripts "proved" beyond doubt that the Modi's "RSS-BJP government" had staged a "false flag operation" against Pakistan by "whipping up hyper-nationalistic passions in India to gain electorally."

Imran Khan tweeted that the electoral-savvy Modi "used" the Balakot airstrikes for domestic electoral gains, even at the risk of pushing "our nuclearised region to the brink of a conflict it cannot afford." Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the PMO and Home Minister Amit Shah might now be ruing Arnab Goswami's getting ready access to key Government bureaucrats and ministers.



chats with ex-Barc CEO Partho Dasgupta and Khan & Country don't like it, especially the bit in which Arnab Modi was planning a big strike against Pakistan to avenge Pulwama, and Pakistan was gonna learn the lesson of its short life. Imran Khan -- Sunny Gavaskar will know as will Kapil Dev -- doesn't like to be caught on the wrong side of boundary. Then, it's either an out-swinger or a Yorker, a bouncer to the head. Khan has taken grave umbrage and has said that Arnab Goswami's "talk" shows Modi had planned the Balakot airstrikes to win the 2019 general elections.

Further proof is in the fact that Modi and his party reaped the Balakot benefit — a majority of 303 seats in the Lok Sabha, a number big enough to ditch any party and every party in the NDA and still run the government. For Arnab Goswami, Imran shouting from Islamabad is like an invitation to the Joe Biden inauguration. Who does not like publicity and this was sounding and resounding across India and Pakistan. Doesn't matter if all of Pakistan was glowering in disgusted anger and Imran Khan had got the reason and excuse to beat India with. Bad publicity is as good as good publicity and Arnab Goswami had in these past few months got injured to bad publicity. Don't forget the chap is an ex-jailbird, and jailbirds walk out of jail with a halo.

The question is did Arnab Goswami know that the Balakot airstrikes were to take place in retaliation to the Pulwama terror attack? More to the point, did he know it three days in advance? Of course, Goswami is going about with the defence that everybody knew there would be retaliation and that the Prime minister had spoken of retribution and so had the Indian Armed Forces. That, in fact, if anybody did not know or expect retaliation, it was the guilty Pakistanis and Prime

Loudmouth he is on television, glib and talkative, but whoever thought he would tell state secrets, sensitive, highly confidential matters, to the CEO of a television rating agency?

Hello, this man Arnab Goswami cannot be trusted with a child's poem. He will blurt it out to the first person he comes across in the society lift. Arnab Goswami cannot keep anything in his stomach. Lucky, he's got a channel to run and own. Otherwise, the fellow wouldn't qualify for a trustworthy job anywhere. Not only is he a loudmouth, he's also got a big mouth — yaaaaaaaawwwwwww! Anyway, the bigger point is, how come he knows all the state secrets? Which minister/which bureaucrat tells him sensitive stuff? The job is cut out for National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval. The NSA should order an inquiry, preferably under the keen eyes and ears of the Supreme Court, doesn't matter if Goswami is close pal of top legal-eagle Harish Salve who doesn't charge a single penny from Arnab for services rendered. The fact is, something like this "leak" which somebody "leaked" to the Mumbai Police cannot go unchecked. Maybe, Mumbai Police will widen its investigations and check on this facet of Arnab Goswami, too. Maybe the encounter specialist is versatile enough! It's kind of weird, Goswami discussing with Partho about Pulwama. At the time Partho was sitting Barc CEO. Apparently, the Pulwama attack did wonders for Republic TV's ratings and how! "This attack we have won like crazy," he chatted with Dasgupta. The nation's Nationalist No.1 likes his channel's ratings rising even if there's the stench of the burning flesh of patriots in them. Now, Goswami says Pakistan and Mumbai Police and everybody he can point a finger at is in a "conspiracy" against his channel. "Which Indian did not expect the Indian forces to hit back in a big way after the Pulwama terrorist attack?" he asks, and we wonder. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Entry-exit point an inconvenience

Editor,
I had written in these columns in the recent past that the entry-exit point at Umling in Ri Bhoi District will eventually see a legal tussle has proven true with the filing of a PIL by ten lawyers from the town at the High Court of Meghalaya. Now, are we going to see a bulldozing act or upkeep of the entry-exit point, only time will tell? However, as Angela Lyngdoh in her letter, "Much ado about restrictions", (ST, Jan 19, 2021) has rightly stated, the state government here "has created a sort of unrealistic bubble which has, in turn, hampered the free movement of its citizens," with regard to this entry-exit point. Also, most states in the country have done away with the compulsory Covid-19 testing whereas the testing at the said entry-exit point is nothing less than a business being run

with impunity by taxing the commoners and also eating into their precious time. This interrupting entry-exit point has inconvenienced the public much more than expected. It has even turned Shillong and the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya into a caliphate — which cannot unfurl in a democracy. Such restrictions on the citizens of the country are unrealistic and unlawful — and are not seen anywhere else in this nation despite the noble intention of the state government.

Yours etc.,
BC Paul
Shillong — 4

Suggestions for seamless viewing of e-paper

Editor,
I'm a regular reader of your esteemed newspaper for the past 15 years, way back from my college days. Those days I would read the hard copy with a specific mind-igniting book scent. Now I read the e-paper (read at ease anytime

anywhere). My request to you is to make available the e-paper back-date navigation like all other leading national papers do. You know, for working personnel/professional it's not always possible to read the paper on the same day.

I would also like to mention that I am a subscriber of THE HINDU e-paper which provides a wonderful, seamless reading experience. I pinch you to enable your paper to have a similar zoom in/out facility with one click to have the best experience.

Yours etc.,
Dr. Rikrak Napak,
Williamnagar

To each his own!

Editor,
I read Salil Gwali's letter, "Our craze for social media" (ST Jan 19, 2021) with some amusement because when I checked out Facebook I found him there alive and kicking and posting several personal pictures. Those who have a problem with social media

should not be on Instagram, Facebook or WhatsApp. Only then would they have the right to warn others not to become social media addicts. We all know that social media feeds our narcissistic nature and we have come to accept it but we also get to know a lot of stuff like news and events from across the world so we are better informed. It depends on every person's mental make-up (psyche) and how they make use of social media. For us students, social media is informative and educative but it depends who our friends are. Many people are on social media not to share their thoughts and perspectives on issues of governance that plague us all but only to post photographs. I find that very boring and have 'unfriended' many such people. I enjoy reading peoples' views and learning from them since quite a few are better informed than I am.

It is wrong therefore to caution people about social media. Leave it to each person to take a personal call. We all have our Fundamen-

tal Rights and being on social media too falls under the Right to Freedom of Expression. Just because one does not like what others post on social media one has no right to pass judgment on others. I am particularly averse to people who preach to others using their own moral yardsticks. Enough is enough!

Yours etc.,
Shanlang Kharsati,
Via email

Uncalled for comments

Editor,
My column which was published in this section of your newspaper (ST Jan 11, 2021) 'Youth Centre sans young people' was a personal view and a matter that I highlighted in the larger interest of our youth irrespective of their faith, beliefs and religion or denomination. However, some people who commented on the Facebook page of Fr. Michael Makri passed unsavory comments without even knowing or understanding the text of my

column. Unfortunately, the Director of DBYC and along with one Br. Dan Fer passed a series of comments stating that 'He may have been deprived of parking grounds at DBYC hence the grudge,' to which the Director replied saying, 'Free toilet may be and since guys like him Do Drugs in the toilet'. Such comments are uncalled for and speak volumes of their mentality which is not in sync with their vocation. I have never ever parked my car there. And it is wrong to assume that anyone who has a point of view on the DBYC has wrong intentions such as doing drugs or to take advantage of free toilet facilities. I am appalled by the comments from these pseudo-religious people and demand an apology from them, because I had penned that letter with all sincerity.

Yours etc.,
Dominic Stadlin Wankhar,
Shillong-3

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"Happiness is when what you think,
what you say, and what you do
are in harmony."

— Mahatma Gandhi

The Shillong Times

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Meghalaya at 49

EVERY year it's a ritual to do a reality check on the State of Meghalaya as it enters its birthday. For school and college children one year means passing out from one class and going to the next. If a student fails and remains in the same class, that's considered a huge drawback and bad investment for parents; more so if the failure was due to the student's own quiescence and aversion for hard work. In the life of a state very often the yardsticks used to measure achievements are development oriented. That 'development' somehow does not include the development of the human mind that can transcend stereotypes about people, race and issues. A human mind that has stagnated at a certain point in its development cannot expect to achieve much. This brings us to the issue of retrograde steps like restricting the entry of fellow Indians to the state because of the fear of illegal migration. This is a fear that has been hovering for 48 years. Actually the real fear lies somewhere else; it is the fear of competition. But as in sport, competition is an incentive for companies, individuals and institutions to excel, thereby fostering innovation, diversity of supply and attractive prices for consumers and businesses alike. Competition stimulates growth and generates substantial benefits for the community. To eliminate competition is to shun innovation. The opposite of competition is stagnation and Meghalaya has stagnated in several areas where it could have made progress.

A state that has marked out its goals would know where it has reached and where the hurdles lie in achieving those clearly stated goals. While the Meghalaya Government may claim to have charted out goals for itself, those goals have not been shared with the people who are the main stakeholders in the progress of the state. On the contrary what citizens see and hear on a daily basis since 2018 is the story of legal violations aided and abetted by the state. The manner in which illegal mining and transportation of coal has been carrying on unabated in full view of law enforcers and regulators, is a tell-tale sign that the rule of law is compromised.

For Meghalaya this is the post truth era where the Government cannot be trusted. The MDA Government has been lying about coal mining and transportation and it appears that there's nothing we can do about it. As citizens we wonder about the rule of law that has gone missing. Our distrust of the law increases with every lie that the state indulges in. Without trust there is no law; without law there's no democracy only a semblance of it marked by once in five year elections. That's about the only progress Meghalaya has made.

Of mono-syllabic grunts, mysterious diseases and vanishing fishes

By Toki Blah

Readers looking for a piece of light reading liberally spiced with humour are well advised to turn away from Meghalaya dailies, both English and vernacular. It would be like searching for water in the parched Sahara. It's just not there. News, views and opinions usually expressed in the Meghalaya print media, are almost one in uniformity. One and all, sombre, grave and decorous to a fault. Only the sedate serious side of life is usually allowed to be printed with a definite slant of course towards tragic and developing political dramas. It's called serious journalism with class. Let me hastily add that I have absolutely nothing against the staid and the dull. It has now become fashionable to be seen so. People sincerely believe that a furrowed brow, a perpetual frown and a long horse face symbolises intellectual poise or the ability to think. It's become a fashion symbol, the ability to frown, I mean. Priests of all hues; church elders; Rangbah Shnongs, Nokmas, bureaucrats, clan elders, everyone who is someone in Meghalaya, are avid followers of the, "gotta look serious" cult. Such people prefer to walk around with a grim face; a perpetual sour expression (khatat jew eit in Khasi); and if they happen to smile at you, every muscle in the face contorts to make sure you know it's a forced condescending smirk from a superior being to a lesser mortal. And we have the gall to claim we all belong to an egalitarian, caste free society. It's very inhibiting let me tell you. As kids we use to run as far away as possible from such characters. At least I still do!

Beauty pageants notwithstanding, it would certainly appear that as far as Meghalaya society is concerned, the person capable of putting on the best horse face stands the best chance of reaching the top of the social ladder. Just take a look at the composition of the State Assembly and the Autonomous District Councils. Awesome, as these are elected leaders, but frankly speaking, the only common characteristic they share are their looks! In all probability the ability to pull a long face is the only common denominator to their getting elected. Never seen anyone of them smile on the many and varied media channels. Some uncharitable, spiteful and heartless

soul somewhere has described the hallowed institutions of democracy, at both state and national level, occupied by these glum sour looking souls, as a gallery of rogues. I stoutly refute such aspersions as it forms an attack on human rights. Everyone has the right to carry and present whatever face he/she was born with. Not much one can do about an ugly mug but one is simply stumped by attempts to be seen as being visually impaired as well! Dark glasses in the Assembly simply increases that silly goofy look. Perhaps it's a decoy. People have been heard to ask "How can an ugly looking mug wearing foolish looking horse blinkers be associated with corruption or even considered capable of engineering horse-trading activities? Impossible!" (Why the poor horse should be linked with all kinds of human perfidy is beyond me!) Point I'm trying to make is, an uninviting face can at times be better than the best of all faked alibis. A positive life-saver in the Meghalayan political jungle. "Butter won't melt in my mouth" sort of expression, if you know what I mean, wins elections, gets you into the cabinet without risk of revealing your true motives, and that's all that really matters.

In the Meghalaya political jungle it is also wise to pretend that one's vocabulary is as impoverished as one's demeanour. This is especially true if an elected representative has by means fair or foul, more by import of his bank balance than by desire for public service (hitting below the belt but what are thick skins for?) managed to secure a seat in the cabinet. Proof? Televised proceedings of Meghalaya State Assembly Sessions will confirm my statement. Look how ministers, doddering, ugly and pretty senior ones at that, reply to questions thrown at them by the opposition benches. Mono-syllables of "Yes Sir", "No Sir" ("Three bags full" perhaps already given elsewhere.) echo through the hallowed halls of the Assembly building. One thought that such mono-syllabic grunts were the monopoly of rustic half-wits, but we live and learn. One appreciates Government's need to economise but why on words alone? Why can't our representatives also discuss need to economise on MLA spend-

ing? Trouble is such a question is capable of shutting down even the flow of mono-syllables. Dead silence would probably shroud the entire Assembly proceedings if such a resolution were to be moved. It could be the final nail on Democracy's coffin. So why risk it?

Yet some of these Sad Sack, deadpan, innocent looking politicians can also throw a witty one now and then. A friend, a former politician, narrated the following mono-syllabic joke that happened in one of the sessions of the Assembly. The Minister for Fisheries was in deep trouble, cornered by the opposition on some questionable management of departmental funds.

A direct starred question from one of the opposition members was thrown at the Fisheries Minister. "Will the Honourable Minister Fisheries kindly inform the house as to the number of fish ponds constructed by the department during the year?"

"Eighty" came the short, mono-syllabic and brusque reply.

"Will the Hon Minister then kindly inform the house the number of fish ponds out of the eighty that still have water in them?" came the next innocent sounding barb.

"Non-n-e" came the stammered but once again terse reply.

With a triumphant roar of a lion that had just managed to flush out its prey, the opposition pounced with, "Then will the Minister kindly inform the house the kind of fish that is available from these eighty dried up fish ponds?"

Pin drop silence ensued. Everyone waited with bated breath for the inevitable answer that had the potential to bring down the Government of the day.

"Dried fish" came the meek reply.

It brought the house down and the minister walked home free. Mono-syllables do have tremendous value when handled by an expert.

Talking about fishes, fish ponds and farms, from Ri Bhoi district come some very entertaining episodes. It is a well known fact that most bureaucrats have farms tucked away somewhere in Ri Bhoi where they believe they will while away their time after retirement. Good idea that comes along with some very tricky management problems. One

such retired entrepreneur well settled in Shillong, who invested in a 1000 bird poultry farm together with some fish ponds, narrated his farming woes which I feel should be shared with others who love mysteries or who are thinking of similar enterprises. "Its strange," he tells me, "Every time there is the weekly market at Umsing, three or four of my broiler chicks would mysteriously die or disappear from some unseen, unknown predator. Traps to ensnare the marauder failed to produce a culprit. The fish in my ponds also simply refuse to multiply. Meanwhile the sister in law of my chowkidar runs a Jadoh stall on market days which is fast gaining a reputation for the most wonderful chicken curry and the best kharang (roast fish) dishes for miles around and very cheap at that. Waw ka Pap, my post retirement investment is proving to be more of a headache than the chill-out remedy I had in mind. I have suspicions but I can't prove anything. My wife and children simply won't leave Shillong to settle down in the countryside. Please advise me what to do". I left him to ponder on his fast depleting farm assets but the adage, "No fool like a retired, gullible old fool" simply refused to leave my mind.

Most urbanites who jump so enthusiastically into the world of agriculture are people who normally couldn't know the difference between a potato plant and a stinging nettle, not even if their life depended on it. There is this story of a pretty, not so young thing that decided to stock her fish ponds with the most exotic variety of fishes. She was a firm believer that variety was the spice of life. So she went about buying all types of fish fry that came her way. For one whole year she fed them with whatever fish feed; growth hormones etc recommended. Then came the big day when the hugely anticipated fish harvest was to take place. The nets were cast, dragged ashore and lo and behold all that came out were a wriggling mass of giant Thai magurs (Thai catfish) and nothing else. Apparently the amateur fish enthusiast had introduced killer magur fry that then grew fat by feeding on her other fishes. Even fishes are keeping up with the times. In India today, some nationalist species are simply intolerant of others!

Email: toki@neline.com

As Trump era closes, Washington cannot rule in the old way

Biden presidency has to ensure social harmony and real progress

By Joel Wendland-Liu

As Joe Biden assumes office, and a potential new wave of right-wing violence lurks, the U.S. ruling class is in a panic.

The House of Representatives quickly (and justifiably) impeached Trump for inciting an insurrection. Major corporate donors, who give millions to both dominant parties, have promised to withhold donations from politicians who encouraged the Jan. 6th coup attempt. Speaker Pelosi apparently extracted promises from military officials to block Trump's ability to order a nuclear strike in a fit of derangement.

Calls for the resignations or expulsions of Republican Party politicians who egged on the coup attempt have flooded the media and the inboxes of elected officials. Major social media outlets have blocked Trump's accounts, along with those of tens of thousands of his followers who spread paranoid conspiracies about the election.

The FBI has launched a massive investigation of individuals involved in invading the Capitol building, destroying or stealing public property, or threatening public officials. Numerous inquiries into the failures of the Capitol Police and the role of some of its members in aiding the coup attempt are ongoing. In an unprecedented move, top military officials announced their support for the election outcome and denounced the coup attempt, even launching internal investigations into the political loyalties of service members who may be assigned to the inauguration.

Desperate measures and the political disaster they aim to forestall signal a crisis in the legitimacy and capacity of Washington's elites to dominate the political system to manage the loss of U.S. prestige globally, which has been in the making since Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Trump's ascendance to power reflected one set of anti-democratic, anti-working class solutions to that incapacity. By asserting an "America first" nationalism in the political and economic realms, U.S. elites hoped for a return to dominance. They hoped for the restoration of the U.S. system fractured by economic collapse and general unrest since the Great Recession of 2008. Since then, however, popular uprisings such as Occupy Wall Street and #BlackLivesMatter, driven by deep social inequalities manufactured by American capitalism, only exacerbated that flailing and desperate leadership.

The nationalist agenda feeds on white supremacist ideology, the lurking pathology that infects American social institutions and its claims to superiority. Fascist-oriented militias and organizations swelled to an antagonistic prominence, mainstreaming abuses against immigrants, promoting anti-Black racism, and fueling open anti-Chinese xenophobia. Trump's supporters regularly threatened and staged violence to build their movement. Killers armed with assault rifles and Trump-flag-bearing pick-up trucks, stalked the #BlackLivesMatter uprisings. Militias developed plans to kidnap public officials whom Trump labeled as his enemies. Right-wing organizations celebrated violence, racism, and hatred and surged into the streets. Republican Party officials regularly defended these actions.

Supporters of this political regime relish the return to dominance of a narrow conception of U.S. history and culture that celebrated white racist power. They

long for an economic and political turn inward that might see the country cut ties to parts of the world whose people they regard as racially and culturally inferior.

This general political orientation, an enduring feature of the Republican Party's bedrock ideology and echoed by many Democrats, depends primarily on the promotion of fear and hatred, delusion and anger, to achieve dominance.

But an ideological and cultural system founded on these emotional reactions to change is a recipe for disaster. The U.S. government's failed response to the COVID-19 pandemic is only the most egregious example of this calamity. Trump attempted to manage public perceptions of the pandemic by promoting a belief among his followers that scientists, the media, and public officials who called for a rational public health response could not be trusted. He encouraged the notion that only he could provide the truth about what he called a hoax. He had long-sought opportunities to foster this authoritarian mentality and now was his big chance.

Trump's callous and deadly response to the pandemic promoted resistance to the public health emergency, which in turn encouraged the view of Trump as infallible leader and his critics as dangerous enemies who should be silenced, imprisoned, or even killed. This mindset gripped millions of his followers to the point that they became convinced that Trump's political challengers could only rob him of a second term.

Since March of 2020, 400,000 Americans have died. The vaccine rollout appears to have been mishandled, as many states report the Trump administration overstated its promises about the quantities of the vaccine available.

This is where the U.S. is right now. Political terrorism lurks within nearly every public action. Right-wingers dismiss calls for accountability for Trump and his provocateurs in the name of unity. Some Republican members of the House who wanted to support Trump's impeachment refused to do so, citing death threats. The FBI warns that Trump's followers may instigate violence around the country.

With a growing incapacity to govern this country, Washington will need to seek a new consensus to fend off a total devolution of the American system into chaos. The Biden administration will attempt to shape that consensus after Jan. 20th.

A return to a neoliberal agenda will only deepen the crisis. People can no longer accept a system dominated by billionaires and millionaires—from either major party.

This consensus must involve using the mandate and the power handed by the voters to the Democratic Party to materially improve the lives of working-class people. This can be done with a minimum wage increase, student debt forgiveness, unemployment, and pandemic relief, expansion of Medicare, a Marshall Plan for education and financial relief for the states, elimination of the human rights abuses inflicted against migrants, and the rooting out of white supremacists and their ideology from social institutions, including but not exclusively the police. On the global stage, the U.S. government must abandon Trump and Pompeo's paranoid foreign policy that diminished the capacity for global cooperation to fight the pandemic. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Meghalaya's birthday

Editor,
A beautiful baby was born on 21st January 1972. Everyone was excited at the birth of this baby especially the parents. They nurtured this child and wholeheartedly supported him throughout his growing up years. The child was resourceful and obviously had a lot of potential but he never took himself or his studies seriously. He somehow managed to complete his studies and managed to earn a living working odd jobs. This enabled him to support his family but he still depended a lot on his parents to support him financially. The sad part is that instead of spending the money his parents gave him on his wife and kids, he wasted the money big time. He also never made full use of his resourcefulness and talents. Tomorrow he will turn 49 years old. I still hope and yearn for the day where I will see this resourceful and talented person stand on his own two feet and give all his children a good life. This will make his parents and all his relatives re-

ally proud.

Yours etc.,
Gary Marbianang,
Via email

Declare policy on public holidays

Editor,

The Supreme Court has raised questions regarding the Central Government's policy of declaring a public holiday on a particular day. The Court questioned the policy framework under which the government announces a public holiday. A PIL complained that the Centre and State governments arbitrarily notify public holidays mainly to appease a segment of the population. In the absence of any guiding principle or any authority concerning the declaration of gazetted/public holidays in India, the executive at the behest of political groups declare the holidays at their whims and fancies and serve the political purpose of appeasement of a particular section of the public. The need of the hour is for the Union Government to frame a national policy of declaring public holidays.

Yours etc.,
Amit Singh Kushwaha,
Satna (M.P.)

Allow NRIs to invest in India

Editor,

Every now and again concern about a 'brain drain' sapping India of her most productive citizens is raised in the media. This phrase refers to the notion that skilled people are leaving India for better career and lifestyle opportunities abroad, leading to a shortage of social capital locally.

There is much truth in this concern. India is nowhere among the most desirable countries to live or work in. More people leave India than enter it, as evidenced by its negative migration rate. India's popularity among foreigners is low, leading it to have approximately the same migration rate as nations like Kenya and Ghana. This can be contrasted to Australia where more people immigrate into the country than emigrate from it, leading to a positive net migration rate.

Addressing the factors that have caused the mass exodus from India won't

happen overnight. These factors largely relate to the fact that India is not by any objective measure a free society. For example, the Heritage Foundation's ranking of economic freedom places India at 120 in the world, which once again places it in the company of backward African economies. Unsurprisingly, India also has a lower Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita than Australia.

What's surprising is that the supposedly 'right-wing' pro-business government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi hasn't yet found a way to tap into the talent of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs).

Attracting NRI investment is a no-brainer: by making it easier for NRIs to start a business and invest inside the country, jobs are created for local resident Indians due to the inflow of capital. More jobs mean more income generated, thereby improving standards of living and decreasing poverty. Foreign investment into Indian companies – for example, through the share market – would help local companies raise money for investing in research and development too.

There are two easy ways

to make a start on a reform agenda. First, simplify the tax system, and in particular the filing of tax returns, for both resident Indians and NRIs. Australia is a good model: the MyTax system developed by the Australian Tax Office is easy to use even for those that aren't accountants. On the other hand, I spent a couple of days trying to figure out the process to file a tax return online in India. The arcane language didn't help either!

No Indian should have to spend more than one hour completing their tax return. To help achieve this goal, many economists recommend a flat rate of income tax without complicated deductions. Rather than persisting with a graduated system where earning more income leads to a higher rate of tax payable, everyone should pay the same low tax rate – say 10%. And there should be no deductions whatsoever, so that recording burdens on individuals and businesses is reduced.

Second, remove all restrictions on NRIs investing in Indian companies via the stock exchange. Currently, NRIs must apply for permission with the Reserve Bank as part of the Portfolio In-

vestment Scheme before they can buy shares on the Indian stock exchanges. There are also limits on how many shares NRIs can purchase. These should be scrapped because they prevent companies from raising funds that leads to job-creation and ultimately economic growth.

I would be willing to wager that these two simple reforms on their own would add at least one percentage point to India's GDP growth rate. I have written directly to Prime Minister Modi with these suggestions in the hope that he will heed my advice. Since 2014, Modi has shown some interest in change by nudging India in the direction of human freedom, for instance, through his efforts at privatisation and the removal of regulations that serve no useful purpose.

The freedom of men and women to trade and engage in voluntary commercial transactions makes parties better off. Indian citizens living abroad are no less patriotic than those currently living inside India; they deserve the right to support businesses back home with their dollars.

Yours etc.,
Sukrit Sabhlok,
Via email

"Courage is the ladder on which all the other virtues mount."

— Clare Boothe Luce

The Shillong Times

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Biden as 46th US President

DEMOCRATS Joe Biden and Kamala Harris took oath as President and Vice President on January 20 thus bringing to a close the uncertainty that plagued the US after the election results were announced in November last year. When Biden formally announced his candidature to the 2020 presidential race, he declared that he stood for two things - workers who "built this country", and values that can bridge its divisions. As the US faces continued challenges from coronavirus to racial inequity, Biden aims to create new economic opportunities for workers, restore environmental protection and healthcare rights, with a sharp focus on international alliances.

To tackle coronavirus, the new government aims to provide free testing for all and hire 100,000 people to set up a national contact-tracing programme. Biden says he will establish at least 10 testing centres in every state and enlist the federal agencies to deploy resources and give firmer national guidance through federal experts. He says all governors should mandate wearing masks. To address the immediate impact of the coronavirus crisis, Biden has vowed to spend "whatever it takes" to extend loans to small businesses and increase direct money payments to families. Among the proposals are an additional \$200 in Social Security payments per month, repeal the Trump-era tax cuts and \$10,000 of student loan forgiveness for federal loans. There is also a \$400bn pledge to use federal dollars to buy American goods with a former commitment to enforce "Buy American" laws for new transport projects. Earlier, Biden was criticized for backing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which critics say shipped jobs overseas. His 2020 plan calls for the federal government to invest \$300bn in US-made materials, services, research and technology. On racism in the US, Biden admitted that it exists and must be addressed through broad economic and social programmes to support minorities. An important pillar of his "build back" programme is to create business support for minorities through a \$30bn investment fund.

On Climate Change, Biden says it is an existential threat for which he would build solidarity across the world to curb carbon emissions by rejoining the Paris Climate Accord. The agreement, which Donald Trump withdrew from, committed the US to cutting greenhouse gases up to 28% by 2025, based on 2005 levels. As is expected by large sections of voters, Biden says that his first 100 days in office would be dedicated to reversing Trump's policies including those that separated parents from their children at the US-Mexican border and to rescind limits on the number of applications for asylum and also end the bans on travel from several majority-Muslim countries. Biden however did not really spell out his foreign policy initiatives but that's only to be expected since the new President has much to do in setting things right in his own country.

Meghalaya at 49: Where are we headed?

By Patricia Mukhim

The Positives first
On Meghalaya's 49th birthday it's important to do a reality check about how much we have progressed as a people. Contrary to what we generally believe and have learnt to stereotype, the Government of Meghalaya (read bureaucracy) has made efforts to address the development lacunae they encounter. There are quite a few officers who sincerely carry out their tasks even though they are not indigenous to this state. They regularly visit the rural outback to get a firsthand account of development vacuums. Meghalaya has come thus far because of these dedicated souls. On Meghalaya Day we should salute them for their outreach programmes across the length and breadth of the State. The same cannot be said of politicians though for they have mostly been self-seeking.

Meghalaya can boast of several national institutes such as the IIM Shillong, NIT (campus still in the making), the NEIGRIHMS a health and research institute modeled on AIIMS and with the potential to grow into an institute of excellence with a little push from the State Government. We have NIFT and the NEHU (which has unfortunately gone downhill over the decades, courtesy internal politics and undue interference of the central government in appointment of VCs). Other private universities have come up and offer professional courses. All these institutes place Meghalaya on an educational pedestal that needs to be nurtured with Government playing a facilitating role and not an obstructive one.

Now the negatives
A friend with a fecund mind who could convert dollars into INR in a jiffy and had one of the most successful businesses in the 1980's and 90's was also a man in a hurry. He started with corporatizing the coal business and ventured into other areas and had spread his businesses far and wide, but realised that Meghalaya and those who were running the state did not understand what systems and processes needed to be put in place for entrepreneurship to flourish. Exasperated with the government's inability to understand the demands that growing a business takes, he coined the word "sleepwalking" to define the pace at which the state proceeded. This gentleman died early and I suspect that frustration had a lot to do with his early demise. He was far ahead of his times. It was he who pushed for the Meghalaya Economic Development Council

(MEDC) for which some of us invested our time and energies and brainstormed for several months to give it shape and purpose. The MEDC was intended to enunciate clear economic goals for the state based on available resources and thereby set unambiguous goals where government was only the facilitator and not the businessman.

Alas! Meghalaya is still steeped in the license-permit raj and despite the existence of the single window agency (SWA) for clearing business proposals which include environmental, land and other clearances, entrepreneurs and established business houses still have to grease palms and pull strings to be able to set up business in the state. Hence from the outset no clean business could be started here. As far as ease of doing business is concerned Meghalaya is in the South Pole. With cold and calculating people in government at every level no one with a start-up idea can survive here.

Tourist destination: Sorry no 5-star facility

The North Eastern Council meeting scheduled for Saturday is seeing a flurry of high flying visitors from the Union Home Minister downwards. Governors of the other six states will be present at the meeting. They carry the baggage of human entourage that has to be accommodated. And guess what? Other than Ri Kynjai next to the Umiam Lake there is no hotel worth its salt in the city to accommodate these worthies and their bureaucracies. The best we have are 3-star hotels in the heart of the city with burgeoning traffic and no worthy landscape to gaze at. Pinewood has somehow failed to live up to its former idea of a pine-wooded ambience. Some friends who wanted to come for a visit to Meghalaya could not find accommodation at Ri Kynjai from Jan 22-24. One can imagine their frustration! One of them muttered, "Damn! Don't you guys have any sense? You invite tourists and don't have a decent place for them to stay in other than Ri Kynjai and Jiva Resort at Sohra. Not every tourist is a bag-packer willing to shack in, in a home-stay. We come with families and look for some comfort while holidaying."

After receiving this mouthful early this morning, one suddenly woke up to the reality that this state of sleepwalkers actually does not have a single 5-star luxury hotel. Hotel Crowborough imagined way back in the 1980's is mocking at every passer-by like a worn-out prostitute who has serviced too many clients.

No the metaphor is wrong. Crowborough was not even able to service clients because she was left unfinished by her creators; she is still an unfinished piece of work. Imagine a hotel in the heart of the city that could not be completed in 40 odd years because of sordid politics. The Centre Point Group had bid for it in the 1990s but was thwarted by those with political clout. That's Meghalaya's idea of development!

And that's not the end of the story. Another hotel allegedly a joint venture with The Marriot was started by another group. The group ran into a financial whirlpool and the project is now abandoned. It is a grim reminder of Meghalaya's many quixotic projects. One is unable to understand why these unfinished projects are not auctioned off to the highest bidder through a transparent bid an allowed to operate so that Meghalaya becomes the venue for high-level national and international conferences also. Let's remember that every visitor to Meghalaya is not a tourist. Some come for business and conferences and we need facilities for this.

An 18-hole Golf Course falls from grace

There was a time when Meghalaya used to boast of its 18-hole golf course. Now that place too has fallen into the grip of ugly politics and those playing golf there don't seem to have the stamina to fight for their right to play uninterrupted and without the golf course turning into a part time picnic ground. Look at the golf courses elsewhere. Do non-golfers get to go loafing there and drink to their hearts content and then break the bottle to pieces? Do other golf courses allow the course to be a part time playground where people leave behind their garbage for someone else to pick up? This also speaks a lot about the people who 'play' golf and frequent the Golf Course? They have no sense of ownership and responsibility about its upkeep. Simple! They think they have paid their dues and the rest always has to be someone else's responsibility. That's how the elite think! Here is a state that cannot even maintain a valuable asset and yet has a couple of ministers with a penchant for hitting golf balls - perhaps in the wrong direction.

How does Meghalaya fare by the following yardsticks?

On Meghalaya's 49th birthday one tries to wrack one's brains to define development. What does 'development' really mean? Does it mean the same thing to

everyone? Does development include only economic development, economic growth, education, entitlements, gender equity, good governance (which includes the rule of law), Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), health, human development, human rights, income, justice, livelihoods, poverty reduction, reducing vulnerability, self-determination, social development, social inclusion, environmental sustainability among others? Sorry about the long list but hey isn't the Government meant to have these yardsticks on its fingertips?

Development a loaded political term

A multitude of meanings is attached to the idea of development; the term is complex, contested, ambiguous, and elusive. However, in simple terms, development about bringing social change that allows people to achieve their human potential. Another important point is that development is a process rather than an outcome: it is dynamic in that it involves a change from one state or condition to another. Ideally, such a change is a positive one - an improvement of some sort (for instance, an improvement in maternal health). Further, development is often regarded as something that is done by the government or currently the World Bank to another (such as rural farmers or for promoting education). Again, this demonstrates that development is a political process, because it raises questions about who has the power to do what to whom.

Development in Meghalaya

But development is not simply about the interactions between human groups; it also involves the natural environment. The basic function of an economy is to convert natural resources (raw materials and energy) into products and services that are useful to humans. However, in Meghalaya the conversion processes have left behind a trail of wastelands and black, gory landscapes that spell destruction. From a source the environment has turned into a sink and the government has no blueprint to regenerate toxic rivers and desolate environs.

So this is where we are at on Meghalaya's 49th birthday. Did we have reasons to celebrate? What did we celebrate? Let's introspect!

Tallpiece: The National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 is just out. Meghalaya, Tripura and Bihar are the last-three states on all health parameters especially maternal and child mortality. Will the Government please take a call on this?

Supreme Court: Swing between activism and populism Has consistency ceased to be a virtue for our judiciary?

By K Raveendran

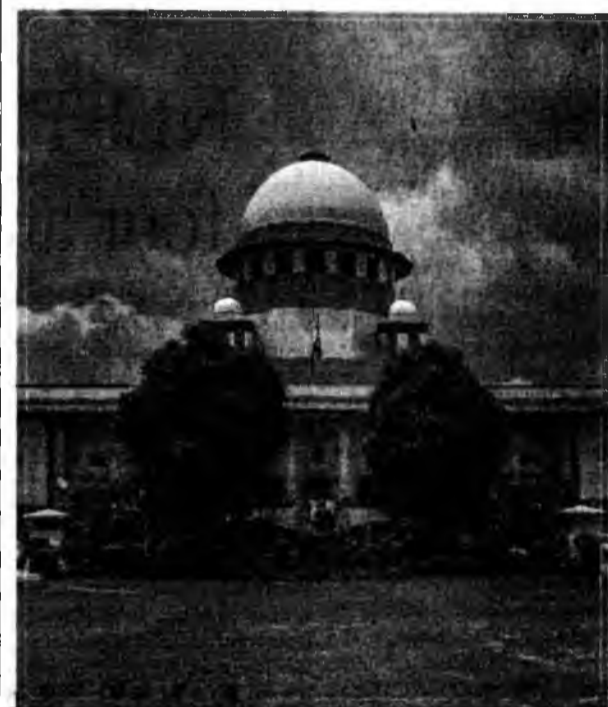
The approach of the Supreme Court on two aspects of the same issue of farmers protest against the Centre farm laws displays a wide swing between extreme activism and complete indifference. Worse still, the change of attitude seems to be the result of even less desirable judicial populism.

The stay on the farm law, which the court itself described as 'extraordinary' has been widely criticised as an unwarranted overreach by the highest court of the land. Legal luminaries were quick to point out court's limitations in striking down a law passed by parliament for whatever it was worth. On top of that, the formation of a committee of experts to study the issue and arrive at a possible solution to the problem has

have told the AG and SG before that whether who should be allowed and who should not be allowed and the number of people who can enter are all matters of law and order to be dealt with by the police. We are not the first authority," CJI Bobde said.

That should be quite a swing between total engagement to complete indifference.

The Supreme Court had exhibited the same kind of approach in the case of the reverse migration in the wake of the national lockdown as part of the fight against the Covid pandemic, in which thousands lost their lives and many more millions their livelihood. The court had shown an inexplicable lack of concern when activists approached it against the in-



been described by legal experts as 'devoid of any legality'. The constitution of the panel itself was so messy that the farmers straightaway rejected its composition, saying it is a panel tasked with pushing the agenda of the government as most of the members were known supporters of the so-called reforms envisaged in the controver-

human manner in which the migrant workers were being treated by the central and state governments as well as all other centres of authority.

It was retired fellow justice Madan B Lokur, who red-flagged the apex court's indifference to the plight of millions of migrant workers, who walked, cycled and hung on to trucks all the way

"The stay on the farm law, which the court itself described as 'extraordinary' has been widely criticised as an unwarranted overreach by the highest court of the land."

sial new laws. One of the members even quit, saying he did not wish to 'compromise farmers' interests'.

In the second instance, the court refused to step in on behalf of the government in a petition by the Delhi Police to prevent a proposed tractor rally by the protesting farmer on the streets of Delhi on Republic Day after the conclusion of the traditional R-Day Parade. Rejecting the plea, bench headed by Chief Justice of India SA Bobde said it was not for the court to remind the authorities of their policing power. It refused to pronounce the 'one word' that Attorney General KK Venugopal wanted it to say to 'strengthen the hands of the government.'

Of course, the court has the right to take any decision on any matter that is brought before it. But it cannot be based on the consideration as to what would be the public reaction to such a decision. But such a consideration does seem to have weighed on the mind of the Chief Justice when he said that the intervention of the court has already been 'misunderstood'. He even asked the AG if the court was required to say that the government has the power to do what it thought to be fit.

"The question of entry into Delhi is a law and order situation that is to be determined by the police. We

to their villages without food, water or shelter. Lokur added that the court deserved to be awarded the 'F' grade for its handling of the migrants issue and lack of sympathy for their sufferings.

A three-member bench of the Supreme Court, which heard a petition about the miseries of the migrant labour, had said 'it was not possible for the court to monitor who is walking and who is not walking'. Further, when the petitioner cited the incident in which 16 migrants were run over by a goods train while they were sleeping on the railway tracks on May 8, the bench wondered 'how can anybody stop this when they sleep on railway tracks?'

It took nothing less than a public outrage to move the court and once it happened, the court suddenly changed tack and at one stage even appeared to have become hyper-active when it came to the cause of the migrant and other unfortunate victims of the lockdown. A three-member bench directed the Centre and state governments to send all the migrant workers to their native places within 15 days and formulate employment schemes after conducting their skill mapping to rehabilitate them.

That was again a wild swing from total apathy to focus on not only repatriation, but rehabilitation too. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Understanding racism

Editor
As one born and brought up in Shillong and a keen follower of the goings-on in that city, through The Shillong Times, I am writing this email to inform your readers of a free (virtual) extra-curricular educational effort (via Zoom) -- a lecture-discussion series titled, "Race, Racism, Anti-Racism" presented by faculty members of Purdue University Northwest. As this is a virtual event, it is accessible by anybody (with Zoom) in the world. Given the time difference, if these events are too late for your readers, they are welcome to listen to the YouTube postings posted after each event.

In the first event on Jan 26, 12:30 - 1:45 pm CST (meaning 12-1:15 am Jan 27, Shillong time) Dr. Artz will be speaking to local Black Lives Matters (BLM) activists. Any of your readers who wish to learn more about BLM activists are

welcome to participate in this Zoom event. Mr. Nongrum is welcome to ask questions of the BLM activists.

Your readers are cordially invited to attend the entire Spring 2021 portion of this race series.

For information, see <https://www.pnw.edu/pnw-race-racism-anti-racism-series/>

This website includes the Spring 2021 program, plus all media coverage and almost all YouTube postings of our Fall 2020 portion of this series.

To register, use this link: https://purdue.cal.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4VLhUdiqWNlKX?_ga=2.157412094.576916532.1610055729-2098541414.1587673563

Yours etc.,
Deepa Majumdar,
Via email

Illegal Immigrants

Editor,
Immigrants who entered illegally have already made all the documents to prove

themselves to be Indian citizens. Meghalaya shares 443 km of international border with Bangladesh, whereas Assam shares 263 km. In Meghalaya, the border is very much porous as a large number of rivers flow to Bangladesh. Naturally, there had been large numbers of illegal migration to the Meghalaya side from Bangladesh, many of whom then moved to Assam. If we travel along the border areas, we hardly find indigenous tribal populations within 5 to 10 km radius of the border. In the Garo Hills side, hillocks after hillocks were occupied every year by people of doubtful citizenship. All these lands belong to tribal owners, who are perhaps collecting rent from these settlers. The custodians of these lands, the District Councils, who maintain all the land documents are hardly doing anything to check this influx, as the employees do not get their salaries for years together.

These settlers acquire all their documents like voter ID, Aadhaar, ration cards within a year or two.

In this scenario, what purpose will be served by setting up check gates on the Indian side of the state or by implementing ILP? If it is for restricting genuine Indian citizens, then it is logical. But it can never check illegal immigrants. Since they require no documents to go anywhere and settle, they will never pass through the gates with the exception of some Nepalese citizens, who also now prefer South India to North East.

Yours etc.,
Dr. T K Barman
Via email

BSS money laundering case

Editor,
Through these columns, I would like to know if any headway has been made into the money laundering case allegedly facilitated by former Bharat Sevashram Sangha (BSS), Jail Road, Secretary, Swami Damodaranda (aka Amit Maharaj). This is the question many bhakts of BSS are asking today. They want to

know what has happened to the case and whether their donations which were purportedly diverted by the disgraced and now expelled Damodaranda can be retrieved. This criminal act which was reported by the media had shaken the faith of many in this city and also donors from abroad. When the donation of devotees to an organization are siphoned off and utilized for personal use by a revered monk, as revealed in the media, then they have every right to questions the wrongdoings. In fact, such public donations sustain organizations like BSS.

The General Secretary, BSS Headquarters in Kolkata, Swami Biswatmananda then had gone on record to say that his organization would file a lawsuit against the accused monk in order to recover the stolen money from BSS's Shillong kitty. Has that lawsuit been filed? Well, those in the know say no such lawsuit was filed. So why was the lawsuit not filed for recovery of the money defrauded? When

you head a philanthropic organization with branches across the globe then your words count and you just cannot be claiming to file suit and not do it. What are we lay devotees supposed to make of your inaction? I have learnt that the matter is with the state CID, which many accuse of moving slower than the snail's pace, following a complaint into the matter by the current BSS, Jail Road, Secretary, Swami Purnabratmananda.

The job was well cut out for Swami Biswatmananda to try and recover the amount by following up on the court case. That would have instilled hope and faith in the minds of the faith-shaken devotees. But that seems to have not sunk in yet as the Swami seems to be content with the expulsion of the accused monk. We are left to wonder if the accused - who may have thought he was irrepressible - is ever brought to justice and the laundered crores recovered.

Yours etc.
BC Paul
Shillong - 4

"If you have a dream, don't just sit there. Gather courage to believe that you can succeed and leave no stone unturned to make it a reality."

--- Dr Roopleen

The Shillong Times

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Leader for Congress

GIVEN the kind of dilly-dallying over organizational polls the Congress party is used to, the announcement on Friday about fresh plans to elect the party president by June this year might be taken by one and all with a pinch of salt. Yet, chances are also that this would happen as the party is currently in a rudderless state and sand is slipping from down its feet in state after state. Sonia Gandhi, who kept the party flag flying high for many years as its president, is now functioning in that slot in an interim capacity. This meant that no full-fledged, feverish activity to revive the fortunes of the Grand Old Party is likely and the drag will continue for more time. Rahul Gandhi is there and still not there. His blow-hot, blow-cold approach to politics after taking over as party chief and later cutting and running in the aftermath of the 2019 Lok Sabha polls have hurt the party badly. While there could be several leaders from the younger generation who can be brought up and energize the organizational set-up, the party leadership is caught by a death-wish. This situation suits both the ruling BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi immensely. The lack of a strong opposition is a situation tailor-made for the weakening of the concept of democracy. Most regional parties are run by leaders and dynasties and they are hugely corrupt.

The Congress party carries with it the legacy of the freedom struggle led by the likes of Gandhi and Nehru. It has a pan-India appeal and organizational network down to grassroots level in every village across the length and breadth of the country. The days of an ailing Sonia Gandhi might be over and the party requires new leadership that can carry the party legacy forward in able ways. What the party now has is a deficit of leadership. Organisational elections are the best way forward but if this is done in a fair manner, there perhaps could emerge a challenge to the "first family"; and herein lies the rub. At the same time, the time of reckoning has arrived for the Congress party. State after state, it is losing power. The more the BJP gains clout, the more the attempts to destroy the tricolour party as part of the saffron bandwagon's declared objective of creating a Congress-mukt Bharat. The Congress carried all sections of the people in its fold. It has not been sectarian in its approach. What it lacks at present is a strong leadership.

Mayhem in US Capitol: The Frailties of American Democracy

By Deepa Majumdar

I have long wondered what true democracy is. What does it take to have a democratic heart? Surely there is a difference between a rule-bound, structured democracy, and a democratic state of consciousness? If the former works from the outer-to-the-inner, then the latter works from the inner-to-the-outer. America is more the former than the latter. As a structured democracy, it is fashioned by a constitution, a posse of laws, and a historical tradition of legal discipline. Yes, America, as I have known this great nation, has always been disciplined.

Invariably courteous, especially in conflicts, American lawmakers are far more disciplined than their counterparts in other countries. Unlike some parliaments, where elected officials throw things at each other, American senators engage in rule-bound disciplined debates that demand a certain measure of self-control and suavity, eschewing thin-skinned reactionaries. That Americans bore with four years of the Trump presidency is a testimony to their discipline and respect for the rule of law. One may question whether this legalism and discipline are necessarily moral. If not, one may ask if they are traps of hyper-legalism. One may question the value of a largely amoral utilitarian legality. One may sigh at the venom beneath thin masks of professionalism. One may balk at aggressive eyes on smiling faces. But one cannot deny the iron discipline underlying American stability. Nor can one deny the resulting harvest - a promise of justice and freedom. Yes America works by two systems of justice - one for whites and one for black and brown people. But there is here at least an attempt at and a longing for justice. American stability enables great personal liberty - above all the freedom to protest without censorship. There are therefore at least three bulwarks of American stability - respect for the constitution, discipline in executing the constitution, and rule of law. All this enables a measure of social and political freedom that makes America attractive to immigrants.

Drawing from nature-nurture theories of the self, America (in its worldly aspect) espouses an outer-to-inner mode of self-transformation that reverses the relationship between legality and morality. Although legality serves as the penumbra of morality - so that morality should always lead legality - Americans perhaps draw morality from legality. Rather, their respect for the law makes them respect morality. If there is in America, "a rare sensitivity to ethics" (as a venerable Indian monk once said) - this is perhaps because America is a land of laws. Sometimes even lawlessness appears with a twinge of ethics. Photographed lounging in Speaker Pelosi's office (during the Jan 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol), his foot on her desk, a picture of disrespect and lawlessness - even Mr. Richard Barnett showed ethical awareness when he claimed he left behind a quarter to pay for the envelope he took from her office. This does not exonerate his actions, or excuse the crude misogynistic message he left for Speaker Pelosi. But it shows his awareness of basic ethics.

Yet, despite its sensitivity to ethics, and the smooth transfer of power to the Biden administration, America's structured representative democracy is not as invincible as it is reputed to be. In an irony of history, the frailties of this system come from the same source that lends it strength - namely structure. For, it draws its mandate from its legal edifice (constitution, rules, laws) - not from the virtues that illumine the hearts of its citizens. Unlike a true democracy, which arises from virtuous hearts, a structured democracy relies on legal-constitutional scaffolding to enforce democracy upon its citizens. Inherently frail, a structured democracy cannot withstand the chaos that arrives in the wake of moral mayhem. No amount of structure can stabilize a democracy when its people decline morally, replacing contemplation with blind utilitarianism.

Although far from the ideal democracy born of a democratic consciousness, the American experiment remains perhaps the best we have thus far - a polity forged within boundaries set by realpolitik. Yet, although feted as a vanguard of modernity and the crowning glory of democracy worldwide, the American system has a few related frailties - above all, its worldliness, and as a result, its lack of inwardness and its violence overseas. A narcissistic polity, America sometimes delivers democracy cowboy style - from the barrel of a gun, through the most undemocratic means possible - rank militarism and the hi-tech war waged on nonwestern nations! After the tragedy of Sep 11, 2001, two students (white males) in my philosophy class said of Iraq and Afghanistan: "Nuke them! Bomb them!" Thus, the generous view of

America, held even in countries America has carpet-bombed - that the American people are wonderful, but their government is bad - is not always true.

Moreover, representation itself (a corollary of structured democracy), when febrile and frayed, can be the Achilles Heel that topples democracy. Thus, a fourth possible weakness of the American system are its insincere verbose links of representation that stray far from ethics, friendship, and trust, drawing instead from business tactics to win votes through advertisement and strategies of competition. At all, a vote-based democracy comes with the alienation inherent in inordinate individuality. Contrast a vote-based democracy with one that draws from true kinship and altruism to forge individuals into a moral community that transcends vote-based individuality! When the American government spends hard-earned tax dollars to wage hi-tech wars, using the poor as cannon fodder in the form of soldiers, representation degrades itself to a two-way farce. On the one hand, elected officials, who are supposed to represent their constituents, vote for wars that jeopardize the very people they represent. On the other hand, citizens allow and abet elected officials to waste lives and money waging wars in other nations. Some questions therefore linger. Despite America's great good side, why are its citizens out of touch with the violence their government wages in so-called Third World countries? Why are they out of touch with this stark contradiction - that while a domestic democracy, with liberty for its ideal, America can yet be a tyrant overseas? Why are they complacent before frayed channels of representation?

Thus, although still an exceptional nation, America remains a strange narcissistic Jekyll-Hyde polity - a formal law-bound domestic democracy that is yet a lawless international warmonger; a government for-by-and-of the people, that is yet plutocratic enough to let large corporations call the shots, etc. A demographic democracy that assumes votes represent the moral states of voters, America makes decisions by majoritarianism, votes, and rank individuality - not by the moral quality of voters, nor by trust and kinship. All this perhaps because the world is not yet ready for a real democracy of the heart. If blind-and-blinding utilitarianism

manifests itself through endless totalizing strategies, then democratic consciousness manifests itself through Franciscan levels of fraternity and universality.

A fifth and sixth weakness in the American system are its proliferation of rules and regulations and its stunning inequalities. Yes The real world runs by a mix of choice and rules - so that absolute democracy (understood as free choice in everything) is infeasible. But too many rulelessness not only loss of inwardness and conscience (which cannot be reduced to a rule) in a people who no longer find guidance from within, but also a creeping tyranny that smothers individuality. Moreover, notwithstanding its high ideals of equality, America suffers growing inequalities that jeopardize its democracy. Can a nation be democratic if it lets the jungle law of the market rule its budget and economy?

The Jan 6, 2021 insurrection revealed a seventh frailty - that American democracy guards against a tyrant, but not against a tyrannical people. On this fateful day Americans saw a two-fold strike on their democracy - the first embodied by Mr. Trump, and the second, by the attack on the Capitol (America's hallowed symbol of democracy) by his followers. Although not a totalitarian despot, Mr. Trump is the closest Americans have come to having a dictator. A strange insurrection, inspired by a personage no less than the prevailing president, the attack on the Capitol, which took five lives, insulted and belied the courtesy and discipline characteristic of formal discourses within this temple of democracy. On Jan 6, Mr. Trump incited his followers to attack the Capitol where lawmakers gathered to confirm the Biden victory. He said, "We fight like hell, and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore." Always a cult leader, he did not join his followers as they attacked. Like an arsonist who watches with glee the fire he starts, he watched this attack on television.

It may be difficult to hold Mr. Trump legally responsible for the violence of his followers, as his speech was ambiguous enough to evade prosecution. But he and his followers remain proof of the frailties of the American system. Despite the Biden-Harris win, Trump and his followers signify this historical portent - that the spotlight of History is passing from America to China - that these are the last days of the American empire.

Direct funds transfer to both urban and rural poor is imperative Budget 2021-22 needs a job-oriented growth vaccine for revival

By Nitya Chakraborty

The first budget of the Narendra Modi Government in a period of pandemic is being presented on February 1 this year. Hardly ten days are left. The pandemic and lock down battered Indian economy is looking for a recipe which should be of relief to those who have been most affected and still distressed during the present fiscal. They are primarily, the jobless, young entrants to the employment market, small businessmen and unorganised workers including rural poor.

The young people in the country are now the most suffering lot as far as the employment market is concerned. The slowdown in the last three years in the Indian economy has been followed by the corona pandemic follow by the lock down in various phases in the current fiscal year of 2020-21 and that has affected mostly the young workers.

Higher job losses among those below the age of 40 years have resulted in an

relatively young has correspondingly shrunk. This ageing of the workforce again, does not bode well for a stronger recovery in the second half of 2020-21 or in the future," it said.

Graduates and post-graduates had a 13 per cent share in total employment in 2019-20. Their share in the loss of jobs was 65 per cent. As per the CMIE, out of the 14.7 million jobs lost, 9.5 million were those of graduates and post-graduates. This is a very disquieting development. Our demographic advantage is due to the presence of highly skilled people among the graduates and post graduates but they are losing their jobs.

The CMIE data show that job losses were concentrated among the younger workers. All age groups below the age of 40 suffered a fall in employment till December 2020 this year while all age groups above 40 years of age have seen a small gain in employment. Further, salaried empl-



ageing workforce, which is not favourable for a strong recovery of the Indian economy, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE). There are signs of recovery in the third quarter of the current fiscal and it may continue in the last quarter of 2020-21. This is a good sign but the disquieting fact is that this recovery is taking place with job cuts and no fresh employments. It is a job shrunk recovery and it affects mostly the young people and those who have just come out of colleges and universities to look for employment.

oeyes who accounted for 21 per cent total employment in 2019-20, accounted for 71 per cent of the total job losses.

Nearly 15 million less people were employed in December 2020, nine months after the lockdown hit people's livelihood compared to those that were employed before the lockdown in 2019-20.

Those who lost jobs were concentrated in urban regions, among women, among the relatively younger workers, the graduates and post graduates and the salaried employees.

This scenario has to change and as many leading economists like Dr. Pranab Bardhan have said that for India, it is imperative that direct transfer of funds in the form of universal basic income can be implemented for a short period to enable the distressed to spend funds and pep up demand. This programme has made some success in some Latin American countries and this has big potential in India in the present period in contributing to economic revival.

The fact is that both in slowdown and during lock down, the poor have been affected most, the earnings in general of common masses have gone down, but the earnings of many big companies have gone up and also many rich have become richer. The slowdown and lock down have only widened the inequality in Indian society. This has to be stopped. The Modi government may plan for a new India after five or ten years but for now, let this budget be the vehicle for a job oriented growth which gives some hope to the young workforce. That is the minimum that the people is looking for from Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's third budget. (IPA Service)

Recent CMIE data shows that the share of those over 40 years of age, which was 56 per cent in 2019-20 increased to 60 per cent by December 2020. "The share of the

TO THE EDITOR

Of hotels & development

Editor, I have read with interest your article mentioning hotels in Shillong. To put the record straight Hotel Polo Towers, Shillong is a classified 4 star hotel. No other hotel is classified in Meghalaya We were also not considered worthy when we tried to bid for the completion of Crowborough Hotel way back, and the Municipal Hotel Project was not even advertised, so we are not there too. However, Meghalaya's loss is Tripura's gain as we have just inaugurated our 7th project, HOTEL POLO TOWERS at Agartala, a 5 Star Property under PPP, constructed and commissioned in just three and a half years. This was because of the Tripura Government's well greased machinery. Shillong was and is always our first preference for a 5 Star Hotel, but the Government's intent has to coincide with our vision and capabilities. Yours etc., Kishan Tibrewalla

Chairman & Managing Director, Hotel Polo Towers Winner of Best Luxury Hotel Chain in Eastern India - World Travel Awards.

Netaji was above all a patriot

Editor, It is an appreciable gesture of the Government of India to honour the great freedom fighter Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, by entitling his birthday 23rd January as Parakram Divas." Parakram means valour or bravery or might. Hence the day is interpreted as the Day of valour or bravery. But Netaji is more popularly known as Patriot Netaji whose endless contribution towards the freedom movement was mainly based on his love and devotion for his motherland. Netaji dedicated his entire life to the objective of freeing Mother India from the clutches of the British. So to me Netaji is more a patriot than a brave or mighty personality.

May I draw the kind attention of the concerned authority to rethink the matter to name 23rd January as "Patriot Day" which will be the most appropriate recognition of the day. Yours etc Uma Purkayastha, Shillong 4

Netaji a true patriot

Editor, When Netaji was organising the Indian National Army in South-East Asia for its forward march to Delhi, a close associate of his advised that instead of having separate prayer meetings for the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian soldiers, a common prayer meeting can be arranged by incorporating the educative and exemplary traits of all religions so as to forge absolute unity among the Indian fighters. Netaji praised his associate for his well-intentioned idea but also warned that if religion gets used to bind the hearts of all Indian soldiers then this

very religion itself can be exploited by the evil forces to create discord and disunity among the soldiers. So its not the thread of religion, which should ideally remain confined to one's personal/private domain only, but the one and only chord of patriotism and undiluted love for the motherland needs to be nurtured and nourished so as to bind all Indian soldiers psychologically to work towards a common goal.

What a contrast to the present state of affairs when religion has been allowed to infiltrate even the social life and political sphere and that in this heterogeneous Constitutionally secular nation leading to violence and supreme intolerance towards the food habits, dignity, human rights and safety of our very own fellow Indian brothers and sisters! Instead of merely garlanding his statue or portrait on January 23 it is high time India wakes up to the secular values, ethics and humanity propagated by Netaji so as to unite the country emotionally and psychologically and thereby award due honour to this

Patriot of Patriots through practical deeds, not mere words or rhetoric.

Yours etc., Kajal Chatterjee, Kolkata -114

Nongrim Hills VIP only road

Editor, When will this country populated by the majority of poor people get out of this VIP syndrome? The NEC meeting scheduled for Jan 23-24, 2021 has turned Nongrim Hills into a fortress. No vehicles are allowed to pass through the usual route to Rynjab/Umling/NEIGRIHMS and beyond and vice versa. This causes a lot of inconvenience to the residents of Nongrim Hills and beyond. When will India get rid of this VIP culture that never existed in these hills and is an import from a Brahmanical past in a country where the caste system is still alive and kicking. In the first place why should institutions such as the NEC be located within a residential area? Do we see this in any other state? If there are security concerns

then NEC should have been located in an area like the Cantonment where enforcement of security 24x7 is possible.

This is characteristic of Meghalaya and of Shillong in particular. Whether we look at hospitals, schools or even petrol pumps, they are all located within residential areas without considering the inconvenience caused to residents and also the dangers posed by a petrol pump in a locality surrounded by private residences. There are no rules or regulations about where to build what. There are no regulations about maintaining distance from the public roads while building houses. It's a free for all. Sometimes I wonder if we even have a government and if we do then what is its remit.

The tribals who have no concept of VIPism should contest this culture and get it out of the state. It's a culture that divides the VIP who are public servants from the people who are the masters. What irony! Let's start an anti-VIP campaign. Any takers?

Yours etc., Iaikyrshan Lyngdoh, Viameil

Ignored & invisible: Burden of mining on women

While loss of land and livelihood is a more commonly discussed impact of mining, an invisible impact is on local women who witness a disruption of social structures, burden of earning an extra income, long term mental health issues and a shift from independent cultivators to being dependent on others, besides an uptick in cases of sexual violence. Mayank Aggarwal of Mongabay India reports

Kusum, 14, and Pushpa, 12, (both names changed) ran away from their home in Singrauli, Madhya Pradesh in 2019, as their family didn't have enough food to survive after losing land and livelihood to a mining project. The two finally returned this week, on January 19, to their maternal grandparents after spending about 18 months in a shelter home in Mumbai.

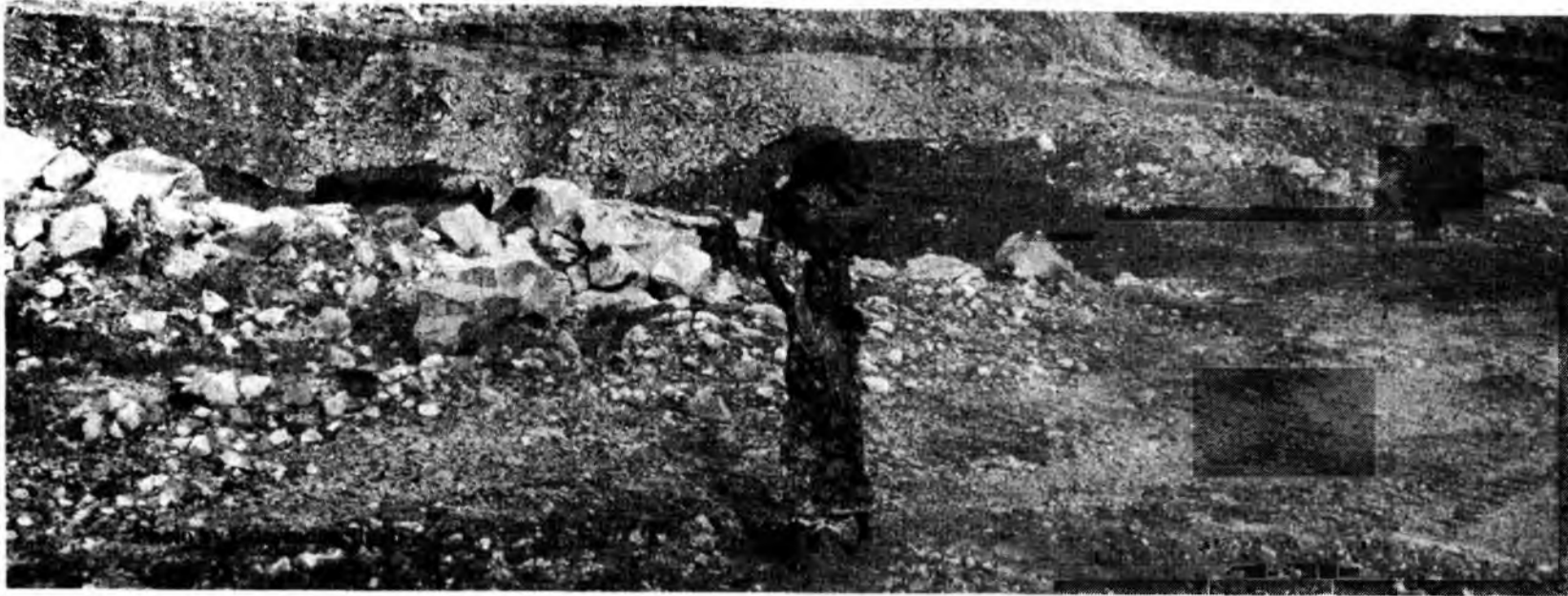
"Their families had thought these girls were dead. After losing everything to mining, their parents frequently migrate between Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh for work and even right now are not in the district. Fortunately, in Mumbai, the girls were rescued by a social organisation who kept them safely in a girl's home. They educated them and trained them. They now returned after they revealed their real identity to the rescuers who contacted us and we traced their family," Manju Singh, a member of district's child welfare committee in Singrauli, Madhya Pradesh, told Mongabay-India.

The case of these two girls just scratches the surface of the transition that a mining project triggers.

When mining starts in any area, the loss of land and livelihood are the main areas of concern in most discussions. But one section of stakeholders that remain invisible in the discussion is women.

With socio-economic changes, a disrupted social structure and the added burden of earning an extra income to make ends meet the transition to a mining area brings about a shift where women, who were formerly independent cultivators, need to now depend on others for their and their family's survival.

Researchers, civil society organisations and experts, including those working with mining-affected communities, note that they have recorded that many women, including teenage girls, are pushed into sex work or trafficking due to the lack of livelihood or other changes connected to mining.



Bhanumathi Kalluri, who is the director of Dhaatri Resource Centre for Women and Child Rights, explains that women are usually like an invisible component in the mining sector even as the impact on them and their lives are enormous.

"In India, most of the mining areas are either forests or areas that have a significant population of indigenous people. When mining starts in these areas, these people lose their land and livelihoods which ultimately impacts their whole family system. This transition is unfair on women who from being the cultivators become dependent on men or are pushed to undertake unorganised labour work. The worst part is that the mining debate in the country doesn't even acknowledge women or their issues," Kalluri told Mongabay-India.

Though under the Mines Act, 1952, employment of women in underground mines and in opencast mines during the night time was restricted, women employees groups, industry and students enrolled with various institutions doing mining engineering courses had been representing to the government to allow equal employment opportunity for women in mines.

This was changed in February 2019 when the central government removed the restrictions and also came out with guidelines for mine owners for framing standard operating procedures for the employment of women in mines.

However, even with the restriction on women from working in mines, they were always impacted, directly or in-

directly.

Kalluri emphasises that mining has a domino effect on the lives of the locals as it impacts agricultural fields around mines, pollutes the water bodies and disturbs the groundwater levels while noting that "women bear the brunt."

"Women (we have interacted with) often complain that it is not just the yield that goes down but also whatever they grow is laced with chemicals. As a result, their health is disturbed, the cattle fall ill and it is the women who are burdened to ensure clean water. Women who work in agricultural fields close to mining operations develop skin rashes and other health problems but there is absolutely no debate about the impact on them or requirement of considering steps to address them even when they are the primary actors while men migrate for work," she added.

49-year-old tribal community leader Indu Netam, who has been associated with tribal community for mining, forest and livelihood related issues for the last 30 years in Chhattisgarh, said, "The impact of mining on women is not a simple straightforward one but it disturbs every aspect of their lives."

"In the tribal-dominated areas where mining has now taken over, the tribal women used to go to the jungle to collect forest produce in groups with others - for them, the value of the forest produce doesn't matter much but the time they spend together is important for them. Their social

structure is disturbed. But after they lose their land and forests to mining, the mental pressure increases on them. They are forced to work in houses of other people for money and this marks their journey from being independent to being dependent on others for survival," Netam told Mongabay-India.

Mining leads to an uptick in sexual violence against women

It is not just the land use, wildlife or biodiversity that changes when mining starts in an area, the lives of many of the women changes irreversibly - some are forced into sex work while some are trafficked to other parts of the country on the pretext of better opportunities.

Netam, who belongs to the Gond tribe and lives in the north Bastar region of Chhattisgarh, said while women seek all kind of labour work or domestic work for survival, their "physical exploitation has become a usual affair" and the "worst part is that they don't even have a space to protest."

"Even if they try sometimes, such cases are suppressed. Moreover, there is this stigma of being the society not accepting them after sexual abuse," said Netam, who is the convener of the Adivasi Jan Van Adhikar Manch, a network of indigenous people.

The story of sexual exploitation of women in mining-affected areas or them being trafficked is the same across the major mining areas across the country whether it is Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka or Madhya

Pradesh.

Manju Singh highlighted that there are 650 sex workers, who are registered in the Singrauli area, and the majority of them are connected to the mining-affected families.

In fact, experts note that there are so many layers of impact on the lives of women in mining areas including mental health issues.

Bhanumathi Kalluri noted that if one takes "Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand or any other major mining area for example there are clear routes of trafficking from where young girls are taken for sex work or labour work to bigger cities like Delhi and Mumbai."

"For the mining-affected families, sending the girls out for work is not an option but a forced decision as their survival depends on them in absence of a proper livelihood strategy after losing their land. The influx of hundreds of trucks also increases the vulnerability of young girls and women. The social structure of the area completely transforms - we have documented so many cases of single unwed mothers who were left behind by men who were stationed in those mining areas for limited times," said Kalluri while stressing that there is a vicious cycle of the impact of mining on livelihood and emotional health of women.

Is there any effort to train and help mining-affected women?

Mining in an area is for a few decades but the mining-affected families, many of whom belong to tribal communities, face an irreversible change

in their lives. For instance, there are young girls whose education gets disturbed or who don't get any training to earn their livelihood.

"Most of the girls in our area are educated till the eighth standard because of lack of schools and in some cases, their schools are far away from the homes which become difficult - as crossing mining-affected regions and reaching the school becomes an impossible task," said Manju Singh, who is originally from Bihar but has been in the region since 1994 after she got married.

Singh states that the transition in the lives of women happens at so many levels and women were earlier working in fields or other connected jobs but the displacement for mining projects changed their life forever and for worse.

"In addition to the exploitation, the sad part is that no fund - corporate social responsibility (CSR) or the district mineral foundation (DMF) - ever looks at women as an important stakeholder. They are never offered any job opportunities that are connected to the market," said Singh.

Manju Singh was also displaced due to a government mining project but she points out that companies claim to give all facilities like health and education to mining-affected people but in reality there is nothing.

Meanwhile, it is not the impact of mining on women while mining happens that requires attention, the period after closure of the mine is an important cog in the wheel of transition in a mining area.

Experts believe that perhaps the first thing that authorities can start with while addressing concerns of women affected by mining operations is to acknowledge that it happens and then estimate their number.

Bhagya Lakshmi of Sakhi Trust, who has been working for the last 20 years for women in the mining-affected areas of Karnataka including Ballari, said what they have found is that the concerns of the communities are neither addressed while the mining is going on or even when they are closed.

"There are less or negligible facilities for water, toilet, health, education, livelihood - just no alternative. The communities are forced to migrate to fields for sugarcane cutting or coffee plantations and there are so many health issues," Lakshmi told Mongabay-India. (Trans World Features)

A triumph for America, and a triumph for fashion

Over the past few months people have been asking the question why does fashion matter? Fashion matters for many reasons but at the heart of it, it is because fashion stands for something. What you wear speaks of who you are, especially if you are in the public eye, this becomes amplified.

Outfits worn by the First Lady on the day of the inauguration often end up in museums, becoming pieces of historic significance. Who can forget Jackie Kennedy's Oleg Cassini blue suit with a matching pillbox hat or the yellow Isabel Toledo dress with olive green J Crew gloves that Michelle Obama wore.

(Melania Trump's "flaunt your labels" style of dressing serves as an example of how a lady should not dress, whether in the public eye or not). A First Lady's inauguration outfit sets the tone for what the White House will stand for during her tenure. The designer, the colour and the footwear, all of it matters.

When I look at the picture of Kamala Harris in her purple coat by Christopher John Rogers, the First Lady in an ocean blue ensemble by Markarian, standing alongside President Joe Biden in his navy blue Ralph Lauren suit, and Harris's husband, Doug Emhoff, the Second Gentleman, in his grey Ralph Lauren, I cannot help but wonder if these women decided to work in harmony rather than compete? Are their ensembles a symbolic message of camaraderie which extends beyond fashion?

The two couples on the steps of the Capitol building, ushering in a new era in politics, says it all. The fact that both women chose independent American designers is a clear message. Dr. Jill Biden's choice of designer and colour was a well-

come surprise, a label even those in the fashion may not have heard of Markarian. Her tweed coat and matching dress featured a slight shimmer and velvet details. Markarian has its studio in New York, its clothes are always made in the city and designer Alexandra O'Neill's usual set of clients is much younger than Biden. The colour of this ensemble, ocean blue, signifies unity and stability. (The coat did seem to have some minor fit issues.)

For Harris, it was a Black designer with a strong voice in the LGBTQ community. Christopher John Rogers is seen as one of the emerging stars of American fashion. Her coat was clean cut, with no added embellishments its strong colour made an impact, no frills were needed. In the US, the colour Purple is traditionally seen as a symbol of bipartisanship, a mix of red and blue, colours of the Republican and Democratic parties respectively. Harris's choice in colour was deliberate, many see it as a tribute to Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress alongside being the colour of women's suffrage movement. (I do hope Harris, being the first woman of colour to become Vice President, will give a fashionable nod to her Indian heritage soon).

Both women's outfits worked so well together, yet each stood for something very different. This is how smart women use their personal style, they use it to celebrate what they stand for and what they believe in. These women are saying America's future is bright and that the democratic nation is proud of both its traditions and its diversities.

There is a definite fashion lesson in it for all of us. (The writer Sujata Assomull is an IANLife columnist and was the Founding Editor In Chief of Harper's Bazaar, India.)

'NEP ignores Transition to Education 4.0'

By Vishnu Makhijani

The New Education Policy (NEP), whose avowed aim is an India-centric education system that directly contributes to sustainably transforming the nation into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society by providing high-quality education to all, is however, silent on two crucial areas -- the Transition to Education 4.0 and including those still excluded from the system, for instance out-of-school children, says economist, educationist, academic and Rajya Sabha MP Narendra Yadav, in a seminal work on the measure.

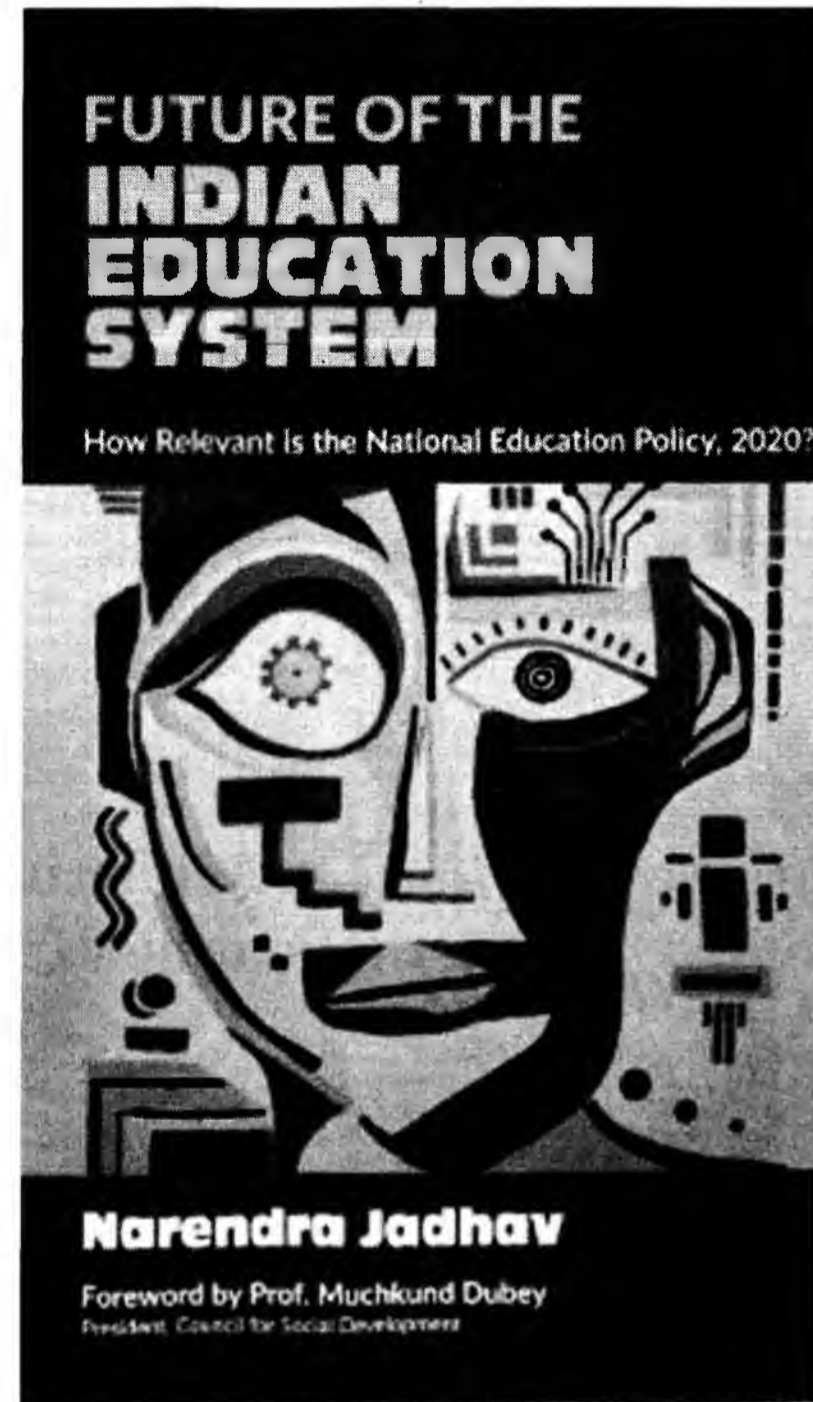
"The NEP 2020 talks about 'introduction of contemporary subjects such as Artificial Intelligence, Design Thinking, Holistic Health, Organic Thinking, Environmental Education, Global Citizenship Education (et al). This good but not good enough," Yadav writes in "Future Of The Indian Education System" (Konark). However, it "hardly makes any conscious efforts towards the much need transition to Education 4.0", he adds.

"I am convinced that conscious efforts are needed for making a transition towards Education 4.0, corresponding to the Industrial Revolution 4.0. This can be done by introducing at the High School level, the entire range of the so-called New-Age Technology which includes Artificial Intelligence, Machine Learning, Data Analytics, Robotics, Blockchain Technology, Additive Manufacturing, Internet of Things," Jadhav told IANS in an interview, without going into the mechanics of effecting these revolutionary changes.

Addressing the issue of out of school children (OoSC) "is a very serious challenge", he writes in "Future Of The Indian Education System" (Konark).

"Addressing this critical problem must begin with recognition of the enormity of this problem. Contrary to the indication in the Draft NEP 2019, the actual problem is much worse."

"In the 6-18 age group, in 2011, there were 80 million out-of-school children, of which 44 million have never been enrolled in schools at all (and the remaining 36 million were drop-outs). Of these 44 million 'never enrolled in primary school' children, there were around 10 million in the age group of 15-18. What is imperatively needed



is a detailed strategic action plan based on details available in the Registrar General's Handbook of Census information. An all-out effort is needed to address this all-important challenge. There is no short-cut available," Jadhav maintained.

He also noted that while the vision of NEP 2020 rightly underscores the

need to "develop among the students a deep sense of respect towards the Fundamental Duties and Constitutional values", it "doesn't offer any guidance so as to operationalise this laudable action point".

Therefore, 'Constitution and Civics' should be introduced in the curricula as a compulsory subject at the Higher

Secondary Level. "This will go a long way in creating socially conscientious proud Indians and truly global citizens," Jadhav said.

The NEP received cabinet approval in July, 2020 at the height of the country-wide lockdown forced by the coronavirus pandemic when schools were shut. Now that they are reopening after a 10-month hiatus what are the lessons from the epidemic that the education sector needs to draw?

"To my mind, the most important lesson from Covid-19 epidemic is that the earlier overwhelming emphasis on the class-room teaching would have to be abandoned. This of course, doesn't mean going to the other extreme of distance or online education. An appropriate combination of the two would be a desirable middle path that needs to be devised and operationalised," Jadhav said.

The pandemic has severely disrupted the tasks laid down for the various stakeholders in the NEP stretching from 2020 to 2035. These include the establishment and interface with the state departments of education of the Rashtriya Shiksha Aayog (RSA) by the Ministry of Education (as the HRD Ministry has been renamed, and various tasks by the Ministry of Education, the National Council for Education, Research and Training (NCERT), the National Testing Agency, the National Higher Education Regulatory Authority, the State School Regulatory Authorities (SSRAs), state departments of education, among others, in a time-bound manner in the years 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2025, 2030, 2032 and 2035. Given the disruption caused by the pandemic, how can these be brought back on track?

"The National Education Policy, 2020 can and should be seen as a 15-year perspective plan. Normally, for a 15-year plan, disruption in one year should not warrant a great deal of adjustment. However, given the severity of the pandemic and the fact that some changes are long-lasting -- even permanent, the NEP 2020 would have to be recalibrated according to the evolving 'new normal'.

"I think, all the important (and desirable) takeaways can be salvaged in spite of the pandemic. None of the takeaways would have to be given up because of the pandemic. This involves the challenge of re-orientation and re-calibration" Jadhav concluded.

SUBHAS AND THE IDEA OF INDIA



Believing in female emancipation, he desired them to be free of all chains, economic, political and social. He believed that women should not only serve as nurses in hospitals but also take up arms against enemies. Thus came into being the Rani Jhansi Regiment in INA and appointment of a woman Cabinet Minister in the Provisional Government of Azad Hind, Dr (Capt) Lakshmi Sahgal

By S.Ravi

The start of the year-long celebration of Subhas Chandra Bose's 125th birth anniversary from Saturday, the Parakram Diwas ought to go beyond the prosaic and verbose speeches, book and stamp launches, statue unveiling and seminars. The need of the hour, is to connect this legendary man of the masses with people of today, especially the youth and millennials.

This is possible only by disseminating how this charismatic leader was merely a magician of words but one who had a vision for India, and the ability to translate it into reality.

He showed his genius as a socio-economic-political thinker, delving on varied aspects of nation building, be it industrialisation, social reforms, education, women emancipation, among others, and very importantly organising the Indian National Army.

Bose under the guidance and influence of his parents had developed a deeply spiritual and religious consciousness. He loved Hindu scriptures and

even in the thick of battles, carried a copy of the Bhagavad Gita in the breast pocket of his uniform.

Impressed by Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda, he would meditate and pray with a rosary. Yet rooted in Hinduism, he was clear that free India would be impartial and free of bias towards all religions, while allowing complete freedom to individuals to profess their faith. Devoid of appeasement, he viewed religion as a private affair which could not be made an affair of the State.

Believing that economic issues cut across communal divide and barriers, Bose pointed out that illiteracy, disease, unemployment, poverty, indebtedness, affected all, including Hindus and Muslims. He saw the cure all these ills in a democratic set-up "where people participated directly and had the indirect right to criticise".

Going beyond rhetoric, Netaji proved this when his Azad Hind Fauj had soldiers cutting across faith while some of his close confidantes were not Hindus.

Bose had a grand vision of India

where people would be free of hunger and privation.

Way back at the 51st session of the Indian National Congress at Haripura, he spelt out that "the very first thing which our future National Government will have to do, would be to set up a Commission for drawing up a comprehensive plan of reconstruction". This included rapid industrialisation of heavy, medium and cottage industries, in order to cater to different needs of the economy and society. Such was his forethought, that anticipating foreign aggression and territorial ambitions of India's neighbouring countries, he wanted the country to be equipped for that.

"The moment India is free the most important problem will be the organising of our national defence in order to safeguard our freedom in the future. For that we shall have to build up modern war industries; so that, we may produce the arms that we shall need for self-defence. This will mean a very big programme of industrialisation."

Evidently believing in self-suffi-

ciency and independence in defence rather than foreign help, he laid emphasis on "Make India".

While more than seven decades have passed since Independence, India is still come to terms with gender disparity what with reservation for women in Parliament still in cold storage, and the induction of women in armed forces in the nascent stage.

Believing in female emancipation, he desired them to be free of all chains, economic, political and social. He believed that women should not only serve as nurses in hospitals but also take up arms against enemies.

Thus came into being the Rani Jhansi Regiment in INA and appointment of a woman Cabinet Minister in the Provisional Government of Azad Hind, Dr. (Capt.) Lakshmi Sahgal. The regiment named after the heroic queen of the India's First War of Independence of 1857 had members mostly drawn from Tamil families who worked in Malaya rubber plantations. In those days of orthodoxy, he supported widow remarriage, abolition of purdah and education for girls.

As a true leader, Bose believed that God is in the detail. Perceiving the power of information, he guided the setting up of the Azad Hind Radio, to exhort the country to join the Independence movement. The station would broadcast news and programmes in seven Indian languages, namely Hindustani, Tamil, Bengali, Gujarati, Telugu, Pushto, Persian besides English, all to avoid the feeling of alienation among the countrymen. Aware of the language barrier in a vast country like he directed the use of Hindustani as the national lingua franca in Roman script.

In order to inculcate the feeling of oneness, he selected Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's "Jana Gana Mana" and officially inaugurated the 55-second song on September 11, 1942, as the anthem, at the German-Indian Society at Hamburg. Since the anthem was in Bengali, he got it translated to simple Hindustani and the result was "Sabh Sukh Chain Ki Barkha". Known as Quami Tarana, its music was set by Captain Ram Singh Thakur.

Wishing for a common form of salutation, he gave his approval for "Jai Hindustan Ki", later edited to "Jai Hind", used widely by everyone. (IANS)

Silent witness to Netaji's Great Escape: German Wanderer sedan



The Wanderer which Netaji used for escaping to Jharkhand

As the nation is busy celebrating 125th birth anniversary of India's freedom legend Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose with much fanfare, an iconic German Wanderer sedan of 1937 stands silent witness at Bose's Kolkata Elgin Road ancestral home from where he had made a "great escape" to Jharkhand's Gomoh railway station in 1941 to finally reach Germany. With the initiative of Netaji Research Bureau, the car was restored to its 1941 look by automobile giant Audi. In 2017, former President late Pranab Mukherjee had unveiled the iconic German Wanderer sedan which Netaji had used to engineer the famous 'Great Escape' from his Elgin Road residence.

Netaji had managed to dodge the British intelligence and police officers who were then keeping a close watch on him under house arrest. He had escaped on the rear seat of the car disguised as Mohammad Ziauddin, in the intermediating night of January 16 and 17 in 1941. According to reports, nephew Sisir Kumar Bose was at the steering wheel during Netaji's Great Escape from Kolkata.

The 1937 Wanderer W24 has a 1767cc, 4-cylinder engine that produces 42hp at 3500rpm which could take it up to a top speed of 108kmph. The engine was mated to a four-speed manual transmission. Auto Union had manufactured only 22,500 units of the Wanderer W24, reports said. The car came with a wheelbase of 2600mm, with a length of 4280mm, width of 1645mm and height of 1600mm. It has a ground clearance of 200mm and a fuel capacity of 40-litres.

According to information available, Netaji was said to be the first Indian to own an Audi vehicle in the country. (IANS)

'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajai Bhambi

Sunday, January 24, 2021

Moon trine Mars on your solar return chart and it will give amazing results for the whole year. You will be high in confidence and will appear creative and imaginative. You will appear regal in appearance and your behavior will be royal. You will manage to make heads turn wherever you go. You will interact a lot with members of opposite sex. And will remain in spot light. You will love all the attention you get. You will also get involved in a rollicking affair with a very charming person. It will be a long lasting relation which will turn into marriage. You will have manifold sources of income. Peace and harmony will prevail at your home. Siblings will enjoy excellent rapport with you. And you will keep helping them. Your professional circle will get bigger and wider. You could also get drawn to meditation, yoga or some light form of exercise.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)

Positive new relationships are formed and you can look forward to good results. It is a friendly time, when it is easy to enjoy life and other people as you instinctively start a new phase in your life. It's time to give your life a makeover, a time of new beginnings and fresh energy. Focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new plans, and exploration. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. A sudden job opportunity or money and property matters could be part of the financial gains. Your physical activities tend to be more intense, passionate, and focused.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)

This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. You are inspired and could even inspire others. You are thinking more creatively, and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You want your objectives to reflect what you are really about, and you are likely to rid yourself of unsatisfying goals. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus helps you achieve what you set out to do. It is the time to coordinate with your creations, love affair, children, and hobbies.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)

You are in a position to inspire others through what you create highlighting communication, creativity and authority. Your attitude towards life would be changing; you are no longer willing to make compromises in the important areas of your life, particularly with regards to career and your life path. You would be able to find a way to strike a balance between self-gratification and the obligations of daily life. You are more determined, and it is an excellent time for getting rid of bad habits. Your mind often wanders to domestic concerns, and issues surrounding your home, family, and personal life.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)

You give a new approach to communications projects, learning, or self-expression. Your most natural talents would meet with reward and acceptance. A new project or goal begun now has a good chance of being successful and long lasting. This is a good time for reflection, prayer, and meditation. A higher purpose to your life is what you seek, and you rely more heavily upon your intuition in order to achieve it. Your self-confidence and positive attitude will reward you. Positive connections with others can be made fairly easily. A comfortable level of personal popularity helps to keep conflict to a minimum.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)

This phase brings an exciting job offer, reward, recognition or a possible promotion. An opportunity to expand on a worldly level arrives now. A balanced approach to life, in terms of realistic expectations, is the best approach for maximizing success. People are bound to recognize your leadership skills and talents. You want your life path and your objectives to reflect what you're really about. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus help you to achieve what you set out to do in the coming weeks. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. It's also a good time for expressing your creativity.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)

This is a period of work and development. It's a time to deal with practical matters, and it's not a time to be lazy or especially gregarious. It can be a time that feels hard, monotonous and lonely. Try to get yourself organized, work to build your

resources, keep busy. You might find that you are very often encouraging and supportive of others. Certainly, you are more accepting and understanding of your friends and loved ones. Being content in love will figure and will attract positive circumstances into your life. It is likely to be a rather lighthearted time, when opportunities are greater than usual.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)

There will be a wave good-luck in love and romance. You spend great time in long conversations, phone calls, short trips and enjoy the feeling of togetherness. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental about work commitments. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. Financial success is stronger than earlier. You may explore new technology and improve office infrastructure as this brings more efficiency and creativity on your work in an unconventional way. Positive new relationships are formed

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)

You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. There are greater monetary gains too. You probably should be aware of a tendency to create your own financial stress due to extravagant spending habits. Your main focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new friends, and exploration. You are enthusiastic and ready for adventure. This is a time to do what you can to build trust in your family life and a strong foundation within yourself.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)

You might play attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. You are more friendly, optimistic, and big-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. Financial benefits may come your way. You may find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well. If you are patient and open yourself up in a gentle manner, you will attract both things and people. Be patient, be receptive and enjoy the peace

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)

You enjoy decisions in your favour when it comes to legal affairs, education, and travel. Financial benefits may come your way. You may find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well. Love matters, finances, and social relationships are especially pleasing and satisfying. You are generally more cooperative, although occasional willfulness could be a downfall, if you succumb to it. New friendships, or new spins on established connections, are in your forecast.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)

Your efforts would be rewarded and praised by people in authority as you resolve issues related to finances and budgets. You are bound to enjoy increased social opportunities as well as a boost in your personal popularity and magnetism. Others look on you favorably. You are more friendly, optimistic, and big-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. Security in love is likely to figure and to attract positive circumstances into your life.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)

The planetary combination boosts your professional prospects as you communicate cleverly and interact in a more positive way with people. You express true feelings, ideas and plans without being afraid of the consequences and try to please your loved one. You enjoy every moment, whatever it brings and follow your truth and intuition to feel more integrated with your loved one. Married people should take care of family members as the health of a family member may suffer. You tend to get mentally stressed and anxious causing health problems, detach yourself from problems and view them from a different perspective. Meditation and daily prayers would help to overcome the recently generated problems.

Education as Career

By Ranjan K Baruah

One of the popular subjects in higher studies for the students of arts or humanities is education. This course or subject is available in more or all colleges in the region. Most of the students ask me what they could do after studying education as subject.

The key focus is to join teaching profession and become teachers but there are more opportunities than only being teachers at government or private schools.

The International Education Day which is observed on January 24 occurs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that led to a global learning disruption of unprecedented scale and severity.

The closure of schools, universities and other learning institutions, as well as the interruption of many literacy and lifelong learning programmes, has affected the lives of 1.6 billion students in over 190 countries.

As a new year begins, now is the time to step up collaboration and international solidarity to place education and lifelong learning at the centre of the recovery and the transformation towards more inclusive, safe and sustainable societies.

Though there are many different opportunities but one of the areas which can be explored is academic counseling or similar activities apart from teaching.

Students taking education may also contribute for the social change by working for the improvement of education for which they need not be formal teachers.

There are many individuals who are working with different voluntary organization for the promotion of education in the country.

Working with communities for the promotion of education is one of the challenging and satisfactory tasks for those who love to work with the community.

Apart from degree of education, one need to be skilled like having good communication skills and others.

One must be passionate as well as possess patience to work for the change through education. Jobs are available in government sector as well in private

sectors.

Many corporate engage educational professionals in their Corporate Social Responsibility programme. Aspirants may even work at global level with different international organizations which are focusing on education.

Scholarships Update

University of Reading, England invites applications for Felix Scholarships for Indian Students 2021 from postgraduate degree applicants. This scholarship aims to support the study of Indian students who are pursuing their post-graduate studies at the University of Reading.

Selected students will get tuition fees at the international rate and a stipend (maintenance grant) to cover living expenses and generous allowances for a return flight home, books and clothes. Last date is January 30.

All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) invites applications for AICTE Pragati Scholarship for Girls 2020-21 from girl students studying in the first year of a technical diploma/degree (2020-21 batch) at an AICTE approved institution.

The students who are already availing this scholarship can also apply for renewal of the same.

The scholarship scheme aims to empower young girls with knowledge, skills and self-confidence so that they could contribute to the development process.

A total of 5,000 girl students will be awarded up to INR 50,000 per annum for every year and other benefits. Aspirants may apply before January 31.

Piaggio "Shiksha Se Samridhi" Scholarship is an initiative of Piaggio Vehicles Pvt. Ltd. to support the children/wards of Drivers/Owners of three wheeler community.

Under this scholarship, the students who have passed their Class 10/12 examination will get 80% of total fee reimbursement or up to INR 20,000 per year for their studies in higher classes. Aspirants may apply before January 31.

(The writer is a career mentor, skill trainer, motivational speaker and can be reached at 8473943734 or bkrnanjan@gmail.com for any career related queries)

Many corporate engage educational professionals in their Corporate Social Responsibility programme. Aspirants may even work at global level with different international organizations which are focusing on education



Image by Pashminu Mansukhani from Pixabay

"Life gives us choices. You either grab on with both hands and just go for it, or you sit on the sidelines."

— Christine Feehan

The Shillong Times

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Coal mine tragedy & State response

THE coal mine tragedy where six miners fell into an abandoned mine allegedly owned by a relative of a cabinet minister has again exposed the poor working conditions of miners who work in these unsafe conditions and put their lives in danger because of the desperation to earn a livelihood. That the accident happened on Meghalaya Day is itself an ominous portent. Earlier the Ksan mining accident in December 2018 where 15 miners were buried alive in the coal mine owned and illegally operated by one Jrin Chullet alis Krip Chullet had revealed the venality of the entire operation. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) had banned coal mining since 2014 after a mining tragedy in Garo Hills but mining and transportation of coal continued under the watch of the Government. Chullet was arrested but later released on bail and since no one is following up the case, it will end up as another of the hundreds and thousands of unsolved cases of the Meghalaya Police since the state was born. In July 2019, the Supreme Court had lifted the ban on coal mining imposed by the NGT which had asked the State Government to come up with a concrete mining plan which would include environmental restoration measures and also address labour rights and laws. That has not happened till date. The Supreme Court order came with some riders which the State Government has not complied with. Hence mining is carrying on illegally and also transported illegally with the state acting as facilitator.

The Supreme Court ruling was very clear that mine owners in Meghalaya would be expected to follow the national rules on resource extraction. This means they have to apply for mining lease from the State Government which will in turn have to get environmental clearances from the Union Ministry of Environment. In fact the coal mine owners were not happy with the apex court ruling as it was seen as an imposition of central mining laws on tribal land in a Sixth Schedule area. Mine owners were unhappy that applying for a mining lease and submitting a mining plan would eat into their profits and the process would also be delayed because of the red tape involved. Most of the mine owners thought that since the apex court had acknowledged the tribal rights of mine owners it would allow them to go back to their previous practice of rat hole mining. But the apex court also ruled that coal extracted should be auctioned to Coal India Limited and not be exported to Bangladesh as was done in the past by the mine owners themselves. These strict conditions laid down by the Supreme Court are openly violated and illegal mining and transportation of coal continues in complete contempt of court orders.

This lie has to stop

By HH Mohrmen

This lie is as old the state itself; it has been going on for more than four decades and one wonders where will this sham will lead the state to. It started on the pretext that rat-hole mining in the state is permitted on the strength of a DO letter from the central government to the government of the State of Meghalaya then. The story that was doing the rounds was that the former MP GG Swell convinced the central government to exempt the State from the purview of the central laws which governs both extraction of minerals and those with regards to environment and forest conservation.

This went on till the late 90s when young people from Jowai contested that the so-called exemption of the State from the National Minerals and Mining Act has no legal standing because it is based on that one DO letter only. To cut a long story short, coal mining in Jaintia Hills district started since during the British time, albeit at a cottage industry scale and the coal mined was used by the sahep and the missionaries to warm their houses during winter. Till the early eighties boilers using coal were still used at the Jowai Mission Hospital, but commercial coal mining at least from Jaintia Hills started in the 1970s.

This goes on without any disturbance from any angle and everybody was happy because both the State and the District Councils shared the royalty from the mineral and the coal mine owners gained the maximum benefit from the business. No doubt others too profited from the business. The public did not complain except occasionally when these coal laden trucks cause undue hardships to the commuters by creating traffic jams because of the trucks carrying overloaded coal.

In the span of four decades rat-hole mining has made people in the coal mining areas rich and it has earned the Government some revenue but at what cost. The immediate and visible loss was the loss of forest cover in the coal mine areas but the greatest loss was of the contamination of water and the loss of aquatic life in the water bodies. Not only was water in coal mine areas contaminated from the crude mining process but even rivers downstream were affected. This scribe has brought to the fore this very distressing issue in which the people who live downstream of the rivers had to bear the brunt of losing their livelihoods from

fishing and more sadly having to survive on polluted water from acid mine drainage which flows in these rivers for no fault of theirs.

Even the former MP GG Swell himself has brought this issue to the light and warned against the unregulated mining and concentration of wealth in the hand of few people only by referring to the fact that the exemption was on the strength of a DO letter only. This warning was published in his article on the souvenir published on the occasion of the silver jubilee celebration of the Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council. Nobody in the helm of power, neither those in the ADC nor the leaders in the State Government paid any heed to his forewarning.



ST Photo

So the successive governments in the State from its inception to the Government of the day have to bear moral responsibility to what is happening in the state now.

Labour rights in the mining business were not considered important as most of the labourers who did the hard work of going into the pits were outsiders till the incident at Ksan. It may also not be out of place to mention that before the Ksan incident, loss of precious lives was not accounted for, not only because most of the miners were outsiders, but even if locals died it was treated as an unfortunate incident because the labourers were not aware of their rights. It was not till the unfortunate flooding of a mine in Ksan village that people started to realise that the rights of the labourers also has to be respected. Unfortunately, it is not known to the public whether the coal mine owner in Ksan was even punished and the labourers who lost their lives were duly compensated and whether their families received justice for their loss.

Even in the present case where six miners fell into an abandoned coal mine the owner will go scot free and in despite the fact that the culprit has violated the court order and did not respect labour rights, it will be fair to assume that as in the previous case nothing will happen to the culprit. This is the state of affairs in the coal mine areas in Meghalaya and it cannot happen without the Government officials being complicit in the act. The question is - Can the government wash its hands of this unfortunate incident?

The Hon'ble Supreme Court lifted the five-year NGT ban on mining and transportation of coal from Meghalaya last July, on the condition that the State Government ensures that

involved in delaying if not denying the coal miners the chance of seeing this business resume.

The Government it seems is deliberately trying to circumvent the Court order and purposely delaying in acting on the order, thereby assuming that in course of time people will forget about the issue and mining will continue without any regulations. If this is not the intention of the MDA Government then why is it turning a blind eye when the illegal transportation of coal and mining continues unabated? The Government cannot blame the police or the government officials for what is happening; surely this cannot happen without the knowledge of those in power. Government officials too cannot simply blame their political masters for the sad state of affairs and excuse themselves by saying that they were compelled to do so. The salary of the Government employees is paid from the public exchequer and they are expected to carry on their duties diligently and to serve the people and abide by the law of the land. But the situation is as it is because the Government servants do not have a spine to stand against illegal and immoral act and they succumb to the pressure tactics of the politicians.

Isn't it time to punish the officials who are involved in facilitating this illegal activity, and make them realise that they are paid by the Government to maintain law and order and they are paid to serve the interests of the public and not the interests of the selected few. Why does the Government not punish the erring officials? Is it not true that their hands too are greased? How many more lives will it take for this mayhem to stop and for justice to prevail? Government servants, be they the police or the officials in the transport department, the officials in the DMR and even the magistrates involved in the act should be taken to task.

This scribe has been writing on this issue since the early nineties and after the NGT banned mining on the basis that mining in the State is illegal, one was hopeful that something good would come out of this imbroglio, but the Government does not seem to learn from the NGT ban and the SC lifting of the ban on coal mining in the state. There is no denying the fact that Meghalaya is going downhill and one cannot just blame the politicians who bought their way to power for all the mess that is happening. Everyone is part of this lie and this lie has to stop if the State is to move forward.

Many private parties and individuals too have filed their petitions in the top court of the country pleading with the Hon'ble Court to lift the NGT ban on mining and transportation of coal from the State. The parties were hopeful that the Court order (which they believe is in their favour) will allow them to continue with their business, but it is now obvious that the Government is becoming an obstacle to miners realising their dreams. By not complying with the Court order and instead allowing mining and transportation of coal to continue, the Government is indirectly

Public sector health institutions decision making has scope for scrutiny Transparency and trust are two pillars of good national governance

By Harihar Swarup

Transparency and trust are two major — and interrelated — pillars of public policy decision-making. Transparency is the principle of allowing those affected by decisions to know about the outcome and the process that led to those decisions. Transparent governance means that government officials act in an open manner, with citizens being informed of the decisions they are making. Transparency has many components — availability of all relevant information in the public domain, a public discourse or debate based on this information and a final decision by the government, which acknowledges and addresses the issues raised during the debate.

Trust is the foundation upon which the legitimacy of public institutions is built and is crucial for the success of public policies that depend on behavioural responses from the public. Trust is earned by keeping the promises made and, perhaps, is not a "unitary" entity. A government could be trusted to do some things right and it cannot be relied on in some other respects. For example, trust in police services may be different than, say, in the judiciary, and within the judiciary, there could be a difference between the lower and higher judiciary. It is influenced by the integrity of the people and system, the perceived fairness and openness of these institutions. The robustness of institutional mechanisms depends on checks and balances. If the autonomy of institutions is compromised, trust is weakened.

The responsibility of maintaining transparency is with the government and given the fact that "trust" has to be earned, the responsibility of the government is again more important. Indians are brought up to trust higher authorities, including parents, and questioning them is considered rude. Thus, most Indian governments start off with an advantage; they must work hard to lose that trust. This has been repeatedly confirmed by the global trust surveys where India has always ranked high in trust of government. For example, in the 2018 Edelman Global Trust Survey, 70 per cent of the public had trust in the government — a high percentage, though a five-point decline from the previous year. However, in an apparent paradox, Indians do not really trust the capacity and fairness of public institutions in doing things the right way.

Let us review the decisions regarding the vaccine through these two prisms. The regulatory approval has been faulted on all the three counts of transparency, but primarily on the first criteria—the one related to the availability of data on safety and efficacy of the approved vaccines in public to enable a free and fair discussion among all stakeholders, and not just scientists and experts. The evidence regarding at least one of the vaccines had not yet been vetted by peers and there was no debate in the public. The Subject Expert Committee probably had a good discussion, but its details are not in the public domain. Finally, the decision was itself couched in terms which was not understood by large sections of people,

including public health experts. Even though the government issued a clarification, the fact that it was compelled to do so says something — this situation was eminently avoidable.

We really do not have adequate platforms to have an open dialogue and debate on any public matter and that should be worrying. The media is, perhaps, the only such space available and it plays a critical role — by holding public institutions to account, it helps build trust in them. While in general, the media has asked the right questions on the vaccine issue, they have also contributed to erosion of trust by the tone and tenor of these questions — television is more culpable than the others. It has often failed to maintain the thin line separating responsible journalism of questioning the government on its decision and hounding or eulogizing the government — both erode trust.

Public trust is critical for greater compliance with government guidelines during emergencies; be it COVID-appropriate behavior or the acceptance of vaccination institutions. The offices of Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) and their capacity have come under scrutiny and there is a general feeling among scientists and public that these institutions have not performed their role appropriately.

Only posterity will judge how well these institutions performed their role — or, at least, when we have travelled some distance from the pandemic. However, questions about their competence and autonomy are not good for generating public trust in the interim. It is difficult to say how much of the current vaccine hesitancy can be attributed to lack of transparency and trust, though undoubtedly, they have contributed to it.

The importance of transparency and trust in governance is to ensure that there is no "undue" influence in the government decision-making — political or commercial. In some ways, the decision on the vaccine has become less of a scientific one and more of a commercial and political one, especially with India wanting to lead the world in vaccine supply. Such opaqueness has also led to concerns about the cost of vaccination. The responses of some ministers that seem to be heavy on vaccine nationalist tones have not helped matters.

One could argue that in cases of emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, these values can be compromised. However, one could also argue that these situations call for more rigour in holding to these values.

It is in national interest that we promote transparency and trust in governance. This is not optional. We desperately need to cultivate public spaces for healthy dialogues, where all opinions are respected. Do we expect governments to pay only lip service to these values and not follow them in practice? An open and measurable accountability framework for governance in health is the need of the hour. We have enough theoretical frameworks for them but little operationalisation. It is time we bring it up as a priority public health agenda. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Portends of Shah's visit

Editor,
The discovery of six dead bodies in a coal mine is a portentous 'ishara', an ominous sign, which has vindicated the stand of the state's Leader of Opposition and his party. Like the Ksan tragedy in 2018 that claimed 15 lives, the 6 dead men who can no longer tell tales, have left behind some more 'ishara' about the continuity of illegal coal mining despite its ban. This Government is rightly called the 'Meghalaya Dewjong Alliance' as unconfirmed reports suggest that the coal mine where the six miners were found dead belongs to a relative of an incumbent cabinet minister.

Two years ago, while returning from a village in the Sohtong area—whose roads were and still are in a dilapidated condition—I witnessed a serpentine line of trucks whose registration plates were removed. The cargo spaces of the trucks were also covered with polythene sheets. It's anybody's guess what those trucks were carrying

and how they could move around sans a number plate. Last month, I witnessed the same baffling scene in the Shallah area. What 'ishara' is the state police giving the public with such brazen acts of omission? What's their 'commission' in it? Notwithstanding the delay, the incumbent CM has finally admitted that illegal mining is going on in the state. But it's doubtful that any earnest action will be taken at all.

Coming to Amit Shah's visit to the state on January 23 last, I don't recall any past governments being cold shouldered and snubbed in such a brazen manner. The visits of Union Ministers or Prime Ministers in the past included innumerable meetings with ministers, opposition members, leaders of political parties, civil society members, etc. The Shah of the BJP doesn't seem to be too concerned about the concerns of our political leaders and those of the pressure groups. It seems that the central government will act as per its discretion, just as it did in Kashmir, irrespective of "public" opinion. Shah's actions

could also be an 'ishara' that he knows too well about the antics of our state government—the dearth of new policies, the scam in the district councils, illegal mining and transportation of coal, delay in auctioning of extracted coal; maybe there are more illegalities which the Shah has been told about. After all, intelligence agencies are at his beck and call. Whatever it may be, Shah is a Modi loyalist, and one of Modi's maxims is 'Na khaunga, na khane doonga' (neither will I indulge in corruption, nor allow anyone else to indulge in it). The Shah of the BJP has indeed left an 'ishara' open to innumerable interpretations.

Yours etc.,
Banshan F. Lyngdoh
Shillong-2

Incinerator in Marten Mawlai
Editor,
Recently one of the NGOs visited the Marten Garbage Dumping Ground and in an interview with the Media it was reported that human bio-medical waste

collected from the Hospitals and Health Care Clinics are burnt by the driver of the vehicle in the open space of Marten which is highly toxic and infectious. In the year 2005-06, the Shillong Municipal Board had installed an Incinerator (800° Celsius & above) under the HUDCO Project for incinerating all medical waste of hospitals and health care centres of Shillong by collecting human bio-medical waste in a well-designed Special Van with necessary protection equipments.

As the then CEO, SMB along with the Health Wing of the Board, care has been taken to see that solid and liquid items contaminated with blood and other waste containing infectious items including discarded pharmaceuticals like used syringes, gloves, masks, medical tubes, etc. kept in special designed container properly protected are incinerated at Marten, Mawlai. It is learnt that the installed Incinerator is at present out of order and the medical waste is disposed of openly and manually. The pollutants released into the

air and the ash residue generated is highly toxic especially to the habitations in the vicinity.

For environment care, it is suggested to revive the Incinerator in the well-designed building in Marten by installing new incinerators operation at 850° - 1100° Celsius which provides complete destruction of hazardous waste. The new product deals with bio-hazard emergencies and is designed to cope with most kinds of medical wastes. Special Purpose Vehicles for collecting human bio-medical waste may be increased in numbers and such arrangements of keeping Incinerators away from the habitations may be arranged in all districts and Sub-Divisional Headquarters of the State. Technical advice of experts of the Health Department, Urban Affairs, Municipality Boards and Union Health Ministry may be obtained in the interest of the people of the State.

Yours etc.,
W.L. Lyngdoh,
Former CEO, SMB,
Via email

Another tragedy, belated admission

Editor,
How many more deaths inside the dark, hellish coal mines do we need before the Government takes action? Of all the governments in the past, this one will stand out as a government owned and controlled by the influential politicians in the government who are also coal mine owners and exporters. The recent tragedy we hear of, but are yet to be told by the Government, belongs to the brother of a cabinet minister. The Supreme Court order of 2019 is being openly violated. At the time Chief Minister Conrad Sangma had boasted that his Government had got the NGT ban lifted and that the Court had recognised tribal rights over land. Fine. But what about the conditions laid down by the Supreme Court? Why was the CM silent on those conditions? This silence is because the coal mine owners don't want to abide by the SC directives. What is that if not contempt of the SC ruling?
Yours etc.,
JR Mawthoh,
Via email

"Toleration and liberty are the foundations of a great republic."
— Frank Lloyd Wright

The Shillong Times

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Parade and parade

TODAY India celebrates its 72nd Republic Day, and the mood this time is one of cautious optimism tamed by the Covid-pandemic and an equally serious protest from farmer unions agitating against the new farm reform legislation. Started in the post-Independence era to commemorate the coming into being of the Indian Republic since 1950, the Day has unfailingly been an occasion to cherish. This is also for the gala military Parade and tableaux at Rajpath in the capital between Rashtrapati Bhavan and India Gate. The events in the past saw a specially invited foreign head of state watching the parade, cultural extravaganza and more. This time, in view of the grim Covid-19 scenario in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has cancelled his scheduled arrival for this purpose; making this one of the rarest of rare occasions without a top foreign dignitary adding weight to the event.

The celebration itself has been toned down due to the pandemic's continuing sway. Instead of the presence of 1,50,000 viewers on the spot last year, this time a mere 25,000 people will be allowed in by observing the social distancing norms. Also, for the first time, children below age 15 will not be granted entry. Added attractions this time would, however, be the newly inducted Rafale fighter jets of Indian Air Force and a special contingent from Bangladesh.

A dampener to the usual R-Day spirit this time is the spectacular induction of a negative factor — of protesting farmers threatening to overshadow the annual event by holding a 100-km "tractor parade" to highlight their grievances and press the demand for repeal of the new farm laws. Lakhs of tractors from the granaries of northern India, namely Punjab and Haryana and Uttar Pradesh as well will roll out, but the protesters have promised the Republic Parade would not be disturbed.

Considering the frayed tempers, this reassurance is an appreciable response from farmers. Their demands are still under negotiation and an understanding could be reached between them and the government in due course. Also appreciably, their agitation is being carried on in a disciplined and non-violent manner; a sound reason for the central government to grant them maximum concessions in the ongoing dialogue. Importantly, politicians have not been allowed to hijack the cause of the farmers. India's soul is to be found in its villages, as had been famously emphasized by the Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi. Farmers and farm hands, who feed the nation, represent that soul and spirit. Their grievances need to be addressed with more empathy.

ILP, the distance between Delhi and Shillong

By Albert Thyrniang

ing the state against CAA.

If the above assessment is incorrect then there is another possibility. The BJP is employing delay tactics. It is waiting for election 2023 to make an announcement. The state unit of the saffron party have not responded to the rebuff by their former president. Earlier the party had taken the ILP issue with the party's president, JP Nadda in Delhi. The party with two MLAs in the State currently is eyeing to make a bigger impact in the next Assembly election. So is there already a 'secret' understanding to please the electorate just before the polls? Will the think tank of the country's largest and richest party pull off a mas-

also rent the air yet again.

A year ago all the 60 MLAs were quite literally held to ransom in the Legislative Assembly by vigil-keeping pressure groups. Not a single legislator dared to differ from the demand that 'held sway in every one's mind.' Had anyone done so he/she would not have escaped the wrath of the crowd. His/her house might have been gheraoed and vandalised. In the intimidating atmosphere the resolution for the implementation of the offshoot of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873 was passed unanimously.

Did all MLAs favour ILP then? Do all of them still favour the implementation of

claim themselves. The Congress will point to the total co-operation with the Government in ensuring a unanimous resolution besides the constant reminder to the government of the urgent need for ILP. The pressure groups will of course tell the world in wild celebration that it is their agitations and protests that compelled the Union Government to award ILP to Meghalaya.

It is incredible that the whole state is in unison demanding for an outdated law like the ILP. ILP is a shut and close case. There is no room for error. Everybody seems to ignore that ILP will ruin tourism and the local economy. Everyone disregards the fact that Meghalaya is a transit state and ILP is impractical. Everyone feels insecure in spite of the existing law that prohibits non-tribals from purchasing land and owing property in the state. The suggestion of an MP that a law cannot be implemented if it is anti-employment is summarily rejected. This uniformity on ILP does not auger well for the state and our thinking pattern.

The Chief Minister promised a seamless and hassle-free registration of visitors under the Meghalaya Residents Safety And Security Act (MRSSA), 2016 in Byrnihat. It has turned out otherwise. Letters have appeared in this paper of the inconveniences it caused to ordinary citizens at the facilitation centre. Any inconvenience is a discouragement for tourists. Any sort of registration will make tourists think twice before visiting the state. MRSSA has been challenged in the High Court for inconveniencing genuine citizens coming to the hill state. ILP will certainly do the same and probably worse.

ILP has displayed the distance between Delhi and Shillong. We are not speaking of the 1491 km physical distance but the gap in perspective regarding the offshoot of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act, 1873. If the BJP government in Delhi does not have a political mind it could be right in denying the nearly 150 year old law to the almost 50 year old state. Its absence could be in our collective interests.

E m a i l :
thalbert@rediffmail.com



ter stroke to come to power in the state in 2023? The likes of KHNAM MLA, Adelbert Nongrum have already publicly announced that they will join the BJP if ILP is gifted. The objection to this 'plan' is that it is merely for political gains. It is playing with the sentiments of people for electoral benefits. We are speaking of a hidden agenda. It is just unacceptable.

In the coming days we are going to see more of the clamour for ILP. Towards the end of last year we witnessed demonstrations, the burning of effigies of the Prime Minister and Union Home Minister. Pan Meghalaya protests must be in the offing to enlist Meghalaya under ILP regime thus joining fellow north easterners, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur. The demand for all 60 MLAs to fly to Delhi will be heard again. The call for the Chief Minister to take his ministers to the national capital will be repeated. The plea for the Chief Minister to lead a delegation of all parties will

the same now? Their integrity is not questioned but in such a scary climate could a decision be wrong? Was it possible that the respected members erred for fear of political ramification thus compromising the 'interests' of the state? Could it be that the representatives succumbed to pressure?

Now that ILP is still illusive no one is willing to take the blame. The Chief Minister and his close confidantes do not accept they are not serious. The BJP being the same party that rules the country will not admit that they have not succeeded in impressing upon their own government to do the needful. The regional parties will not acknowledge that being partners they need to share the blame for the ILP 'failure'. The Congress won't confess they were not in favour of ILP during their erstwhile regimes.

If ILP is in fact granted then all will line up to take Gt credit. The government will claim that it ensured the central government fulfills the aspirations of the state. The regional parties will ac-

quent power disruptions in certain localities, particularly Upper Mawprem and adjoining areas, definitely bring the administration of MeECL into question. There must be serious faults in the system, hence the consumers are at the receiving end. However, I have huge admiration for the Assistant Executive Engineer of Upper Mawprem Sub-division — one Mr Pakma who is very cooperative in promptly fixing minor faults. I got to know that due to the "overload" of electricity consumption the areas around are badly in need of "additional transformers". People now fee that the Board must stop granting permission for new connections until the new transformers are installed.

It goes without saying that we have never depended on electric power so much now than ever before. This COVID pandemic has forced us to work from home which means using gadgets that all require electricity. We can't think of digital activity without electricity. From mobile charging to running WiFis, computers, internet and media work, we fully depend on power supply. Our virtual classes and various conferences and meetings will not be possible without ceaseless electricity. I am sure the concerned authorities are fully aware of this. Moreover, the

government has directed all schools and colleges to conduct online classes. But how is it possible to have that unless we have uninterrupted power supply? I have personally noticed that innumerable students had failed to catch up with their online classes due to recurrent power-cuts. If a thorough survey is conducted the findings would be that a huge percentage of our students could not connect to their remotely run classes due to regular electricity failure. Hence institutions that issue orders should also know the ground realities.

Perhaps, our local professionals from the Information Technology sector and multinational corporate houses who have returned home from Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi to work-from-home have their sad tales to tell. One employee from Gurgaon said that on repeated requests, his company finally granted him permission to work from home and he has now returned to Shillong. What he found disgusting is that his first day of work-from-home was a total disaster. He could not complete his assignments due to the frequent power cuts, one of which lasted continuously for over four hours. He could not participate in crucial webinar meetings either. Now he is worried and re-

gretting the decision to return home. This is just one example. The student community has countless grievances against the frequent power-outage.

The crux of the matter about MeECL is that things are in shambles. However, the Board that is starved of financial resources is struggling hard to survive. The outstanding debts of the MeECL board have become a perennial liability for the government. Perhaps lack of professionalism, incompetence, and absence of proper streamlining of the day-to-day operations has ruined this Corporation. One believes, this mega electricity board needs complete "overhauling" and thorough "recharging". We should know that unless we have a "vibrant" electricity supply agency in the State, we cannot expect developmental activities to happen. Fueling the powerhouse must be our prime concern now. Our dilly-dallying might further aggravate the problems and force the State to grope in the darkness of regression.

Yours etc.,
Salil Gwali,
Shillong

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

Mamata changes turf from Bengal to Bengali elections!

A fight to finish begins?

By Shivaji Sarkar

Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Mamata Banerjee, has changed the turf from Bengal to Bengali elections on the 125th birth anniversary of "Deshnayak" Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. The West Bengal chief minister used the Jai Shri Ram war cry to take away the wind out of the sails from her "outsider" rival's bid to capture the state's people's love and devotion to Netaji. (It may be recalled that during the Ram janmabhoomi bhoomipujan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said "Jai Saram", the usual northern Indian salutation).

Her one-minute speech stoked the Bengali emotions and pride so high that her arch rivals - CPM and Bengal Congress threw their plank behind her. CPM leader Mohd Salim in a press conference and Congress leader Adhir Chaudhury have agreed with Mamata that it was an official function and such party slogans were inappropriate. It would be too much of a speculation to imagine that all the three parties would form a combine. But when it comes to the northern rival, their opposition might create a common unannounced platform.

Whether Mamata's supposed anger was planned or not, she, since the morning

She apparently wins emotions. But there are voices in the state echoed by a magazine Swarajya that speaks of the other views too, "the Bengal CM could have ignored slogans, or could have silenced the Jai Shri Ram sloganeers with Netaji Zindabad by flying off the handle, she only confirmed her intemperate nature". She is also not being pardoned for this state of affairs today on the Ram slogan, "and it is of Mamata Banerjee's own making. Since 2016, Jai Shri Ram has become an acutely political one and the TMC chief was quick to order the state administration to obstruct BJP and its affiliates organising Ram Navami celebrations through covert means and administrative curbs on such processions or banning it to appease her valuable Muslim vote bank," Swarajya says.

The perception strengthened after denial by her government to hold Saraswati pujas in some schools and even Durga pujas at some places though religious events of minorities were allowed to be observed.

Mamata is using the Netaji anniversary to change that by creating a pan-Bengal sentiment as she finds it not easy to counter the BJP's political aggression and poaching on



of January 23, has been paving a separate path. Before the commencement of the 7-km procession from Shyambazar Netaji statue she blew a conch shell at 12.15 pm, the time when Netaji was born in 1897, a tradition Bengal has been following since his mysterious disappearance in 1945.

There she also stoked another Bengali soft corner of shifting of the capital from Calcutta (Kolkata) to New Delhi in 1911 by the British, post-1905 anti-Bengal partition movement, considered as a punishment to Bengalis as well as communalising politics and Muslim League's 1946 "direct action" slaughter of Hindus in the city and Noakhali forcing the Partition of the country.

Her demand for four national capitals and roving Parliament sessions has support for regaining that pride. Bengalis see it as restoration of their long-pending due as well as a move to decentralise from a heavy-headed Delhi centre and seem to agree with her, "I believe that India must have four rotating capitals. The English ruled the entire country from Kolkata. Why should there be only one capital city in our country."

Her questioning of why Deshnayak Diwas as celebrated in West Bengal to Parakram Diwas has wide support as she says, "Rabindranath Tagore (another Bengal icon) had described Netaji as 'Deshnayak' and that is why we have today used the name to link the two legends of Bengal."

"What is the meaning of 'Parakram'? They may dislike me politically but could have consulted with me. They could have consulted with Netaji's great-grandsons Sugata Bose or Sumantra Bose on choosing a word," Banerjee says. She has been calculative.

the leaders of her party. She has also not found it easy to come out of the accusations of promoting her nephew Abhishek Bandyopadhyay and his alleged unsavoury deeds.

Astute politically, having risen from the ranks of Chhaatra Parishad, students' wing of the Congress during former CM Siddharth Shankar Ray's times, she took up the challenge to contest symbolically from Nandigram, which is the supposed bastion of Shubhendu Adhikari, who defected to BJP a few days back, known for organizing the protest against CPM government and bringing TMC to power.

Despite this it is not easy to checkmate the rise of the BJP, a result of minority aggrandisement, alleged graft of Mamata's aides, a number of scams — Saradha, Naarada and Rose Valley type — and deteriorating law and order situation.

Bengal is not happy with her intemperate and unpredictable behaviour nor does it support her gesture to minorities or her offering of prayers in their style. She is aware of it. She needs an image correction.

She uses the Netaji anniversary to refurbish her 'Bengali' image. It has caused ripples in the society leading many of her critics to visibly come to her support. It has certainly thrown a spanner in her rival's tactics. But elections are still about three months away. The main rival is not a political novice. It may come out with counter strategies during the Saraswati puja, Ramakrishna Paramahansa jayanti, Holi called Dol in Bengal or Baishakhi. The electoral battle will be colourful and how other parties and Mamata counteract in the state would be interesting to watch. Whosoever goes down would fight to the finish.

TO THE EDITOR

Unjustified delay in publishing MCS results

Editor,
I wish to draw the attention of the Honourable Chief Justice of the High Court of Meghalaya and His Lordship's Companion Judges of the said High Court to the sad and troubling plight of the 576 students who had appeared for the Meghalaya Civil Service (Mains) Examination in the month of January last year. It is a matter of great concern that this prestigious examination has been dragging on for years now, without any positive end or closure. It needs no mentioning that from the 576 eligible candidates who had cleared the Preliminary examination fair and square, many are working class citizens who perhaps had quit their former jobs to prepare full time for the MCS examination. Others are young students who have forgone their higher studies or employment opportunities for the greater goal and aspiration of becoming an MCS officer. Further still, a vast majority of the qualified candidates may have now crossed the age limit as prescribed by the Government, so now they are unable to seek employment opportu-

nities elsewhere. If truth be spoken then it is not just and proper that due to the political games being played by some people in power, the lives of innocent candidates are being destroyed. MPSC remains silent and has not acted on this matter till date. It shows the failure of the MPSC to live up to the ideals of transparency and integrity.

In the neighbouring state of Assam, the now revamped Asom Public Service Commission has the integrity and transparency to at least put up a notice on their official website that due to some pending legal matter, recruitment to the ACS is being put on hold. Here in Meghalaya, MPSC does not even clarify the reasons for the inordinate delay in declaring the results but is keeping the candidates in the dark. Those who appeared for the exams are unsure if the results are delayed because of legal matters or some in-house inefficiency issues. This present Chairperson of MPSC is answerable to the call for transparency, and should answer as to why he and his Member colleagues at MPSC should not be held accountable for playing with the future of over 500 candidates. Beyond a certain point, every man, whatever his station in life, reaches a point of frustration at the system

he is part of when things do not proceed in the way they should.

This letter should not be read as interfering in any way with any legal matters if there are any, but merely a wake-up call to the MPSC to be more transparent in its functioning and to prove itself worthwhile to be called a constitutional body. The Chief Justice of Meghalaya High Court and the Judges of the High Court are the only source of hope for the 576 candidates right now, as any other road leads to political interference. Please My Lords, help us.

Yours etc.,
Jeremiah S,
Via email

Frequent power-cuts: MeECL needs recharging
Editor,
I am writing this letter after repeated requests from several parents and employees of corporate and multinational companies from some of the localities in the town. The frequent electricity failures in Shillong is disrupting lives. In a day the residents experience more than eight to fifteen power-outages. The fact why there are so fre-

*"Laughter is the closest distance
between two people."*

--- Victor Borge

The Shillong Times

Vol No: L.XIII No. 162 SHILLONG, THURSDAY, JANUARY 28, 2021

R-Day with a difference

THE storming of the Red Fort by a group of farmers after nearly 65 days of peaceful protest in the ramparts of Delhi is a blot on the most auspicious day for the country—a day when the Constitution came into being and India became a full-fledged socialist, democratic Republic 72 years ago. Normally Republic Day celebration are staid and predictable and include the usual display of the country's military prowess and the cultural symbols of every state in the country. But this year also saw the tableau of the Ram Mandir which in itself is a deviation from the cherished principles of 'secularism' although this word was coined rather late in the day. The farmers' protest might have been well-intended but it did not or could not foresee the subversive strategies of those who wanted to discredit the movement. That a Government that's not given to backtracking of any law passed thus far, including the contentious CAA would allow a movement to continue after eleven rounds of failed talks is not innocuous. Perhaps there's more than what meets the eye considering that the leader of the group that stormed the Red Fort—Deep Sidhu was previously seen hobnobbing with Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah. Could he have been used to sabotage the farmer's protest since there seemed no way out of the deadlock? Similar strategies were used against the Shaheen Bagh protestors and many are still languishing in jail. Certainly, these strategies of the deep state belie India's democratic traditions which allow for all kinds of non-violent protests.

It is undesirable that over one hundred police personnel had to bear the brunt of the violence that erupted on January 26. Whether security was breached or allowed to be breached is still in the domain of guesswork at least for the general public. What is questionable is why Deep Sidhu and others connected with him have not been arrested. Those who watched the events unfolding on TV screens could not believe what they saw. There was a supposed farmer climbing the ramparts of the Red Fort to put up a flag symbolising the Sikh faith. Meanwhile a flummoxed Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), the coalition of farmer unions leading the agitation has distanced itself from the violence. That was expected since the violence is intended to discredit a purposive movement. But even at this point the country is divided as far as the farmers' protest is concerned. Some are of the view that the farm laws passed recently are progressive and would allow a free market for the farmers rather than relying on the mandis. Those with a liberal view believe that no laws can be passed without consulting the stakeholders. Also that Agriculture is a state subject and the remit of state governments. This trampling on the state's power to enact its own laws will erode the federal nature of Indian democracy.

The times they are a-changin'

By Deepa Majumdar

This article is dedicated to Sri Ramakrishna, whose advent marked the beginning of a new age.

In the sixties, when Dylan published, "The times they are a-changin'," things already felt portentous. Imagine how much more portentous they are today.

Those halcyon days of the Shillong-of-the-sixties! How can one forget them? This is no sentimental drivel about a past long gone. This is no clinging to a land and a people who did not want "outsiders." This is no phantasmal search for authenticity. All terrestrial roots are inherently chimerical. Our true roots lie in a hidden God, who asks for the near impossible—that we seek Him from amidst the furor of the world.

Here we are, caught between two carnivals—the divine carnival flowing with Joy Absolute, and the carnival of worldliness flowing with fleeting pleasures of sense-gratification. A beguiling mirage, the worldliness of the world blinds the planet. How do we pierce through this haze that chokes Nature and the hearts of men already hardened by mammon? The eastern scriptures (Hinduism, Buddhism) urge us to be like the floating lotus, in contact with water, yet dry. Like the lotus, we must float on the worldliness of the world, yet remain untouched by it. One way of doing so is to make sense of the future by reflecting on the past.

The whole point in looking back at my Shillong days, is not to cleave to something already devoured by nomadic time, but to fathom the true meaning and purpose of modernity. It is a look back, so we can leap forward to an age that has no name yet. It is a look back so we can make sense of history as it transitions from one macro-cycle to the next. Here we are, about to leave behind modernity to enter a new nameless age, as the spotlight of History shifts from western civilization to China, and the rules of racism change.

Brave are the youth born in these extraordinary times, when the world is in turmoil, the environment endangered like never before, and nature rebukes us through a pandemic that puts mankind's necrophilia to shame. Former Pope, John Paul II asked us to change from a culture of death to a culture of life. By "culture of death," he meant our heightened death

instinct, spurred by concupiscence. But not even the sickest death instinct can compare with this sepulchral pandemic—a ruthless non-moral evil that devours any and every body, irrespective of race, class, or gender.

All this brings me back to the Shillong-of-the-sixties... I know Shillong has changed drastically, but what do I see when I look back through the mist of memories and the funnel of time?

Crisp winter afternoons when time stood still and the clouds hung low, as if fishing for our collective consciousness. Bobbing dahlias refreshed by dew. Frost-laden grass that made us long for snow. Luscious gooseberries in terraced gardens bursting with plenitude. Natural orchids swinging from natural perches. Waterfalls gurgling down forested hills. Strains of hymns interspersed with sounds of strumming guitars and soulful kirtans, flowing from across the deep green of the hills. Glowing fireplaces, where wood and coal vied with each other to provide warmth. Tailor-made clothes that shamed mass production and its homogeneity. Home visits from doctors who sat by your bedside to feel your pulse—not your purse. Villagers bent low beneath baskets of fresh vegetables, with time to share their lives over cups of tea. Pre-capitalistic restaurants that felt like home, with waiters bending low, asking, "Will you have more?" A puritanical innocence with respect to the body. A serene pre-television life filled with songs we sang for one another. A pre-refrigerator life filled with fresh meals and garden-grown organic vegetables. A telephone system with live operators who said, "Number please?" and chatted with you. A data-free, gadget-free life in which children played with each other—not devices. An unhurried pace of life. A whole afternoon gliding past as one sat absorbed in the beauty of the moment. A quiet, cozy state of being that hushed becoming, leaving us with excess time, to be spent either in deep contemplation, or lethargic sleep. A God-inspired state of being that did not allow one to speak of God. Religious festivals that refreshed man and nature with the ambience of mysticism. Yes, those were

quiet days that infused in us unfathomable quietude and repose. Little did I anticipate the great disquiet of the future...

But this is only one side of the picture. This is the beautiful Shillong I remember. To balance this, we have the ugly side of Shillong in undivided Assam-and-India-of-the-sixties. Entrenched linguistic-religious identities that spawned sectarianism and hatred. A blind-and-blinding identity consciousness that persecuted minorities, while excusing terrible iniquities in natives, saying, "He is one of our own!" Pogroms and riots that paved the way for insurgencies. Friends and neighbors turning into enemies, thus proving that love and hatred belong to the pairs of opposites. A lethal puritanism that caricatured the ascetic norms and policed women more than men. A puritanical sexism that closeted sexual abuse. Intact families (because divorce was not allowed) full of strife. A class system that sullied all semblance of fraternity. Altogether, a great disquiet. But greater was the disquiet that was to come...

Yes, History swings in extremes. Little did we guess that the swing from puritanism and identity politics, in directions prompted by modernity—towards the so-called sexual revolution, religious bigotry, and rank individuality—would be as drastic as it turned out. What has the past led to? What do we have at present? As always, a combination of the beautiful with the ugly. Greater individuality. Tangible prospects of economic prosperity. Greater cosmopolitanism (digital and real). Greater acceptance of those formerly rejected as pariah. But also, a misguided search for love that has led to breakdown of the family, and a descent into the body, with excessive attention on the carnal and greater violence against women. The advent of a new trinity: money, market, and technology. Easy access to name and fame. Religious bigotry and incendiary attempts at theocracy, both reviving the poison of caste hatred. Above all, a flight of the life-giving ascetic norms, and as a result, a multitude of misfortunes characteristic of modernity: epidemics of depression and opioid addictions, the hi-tech war and cowardly

drone attacks, historically unprecedented levels of greed and lust, hence a heightened worldliness, and a hitherto unknown flight of wisdom, etc. For the greater our materialism, the greater our foolishness!

Yet, despite these dreary realities, our human potential—especially our capacity for true joy—can never vanish. Nothing can erase the divine wellspring of existence-bliss-awareness within our souls. Some constants shine forth as the substance that bestows serenity upon fleeting surface changes. For, every "now" in the sempiternal flow of time possesses the seed of eternity. What else is eternity but a frozen "now" bursting forth with plenitude and divine joy? As eternity washes time, we sense the mellifluous still point behind it all—that point where time vanishes into eternity, carrying space and causation with it, as we transcend the body to lose ourselves in the divine Light within. Entombed and blinded by materialism and concupiscence, and lost in febrile desires, mankind has lost touch with the eternal verities that cry themselves hoarse from beyond the subject-object boundary. Eternal stars upon a firmament that transcends time-space-causation, the virtues shine forever. So does the heaven of peace, which rules from atop the mountain of dispassion.

But here we are, far below this feast of joy, blinded and broken by the toll of sins we have added to our original sin of alienation from God. The point though is not to focus on sin but on our divine potential, ever seeking expression even in the greatest sinners.

What is all this leading to? Divine providence, I am convinced, brought about modernity, to alleviate poverty and to show us, through the temptations of these times, that descent into the body, and attachment to money, name, fame, etc. are blinders that sink us in our own narcissism. From the ashes of modernity, I am convinced, will rise the phoenix of stronger ascetic norms—true renunciation and chastity, which we choose with deliberate volition, with no puritanical coercion whatsoever!

Always darkest before dawn, modernity is the darkness waiting to yield a sunrise of spiritual effulgence.

Email: dmajumdar@gmail.com

Substantial increase in investment required in new fiscal

Healthcare must be priority for Budget 2021-22

By Gyan Pathak

Health sector has been in focus right from the beginning of the financial year 2020-21, since India was locked down on March 24 last year due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. It proved a straw on the camel's back. Our healthcare facilities were overwhelmed at a time when the government had actually lowered the allocation, which was just about one per cent of the GDP, while it was 1.5 per cent in 2018-19, and the government had promised to raise it to 2.5 per cent by 2025. The pandemic enforced urgent spending, both public and private, financially breaking most of us, and it is in this context people are waiting for the budget 2021-22 in general and the health sector in particular.

The fear of the pandemic and the biological risks that we run do not permit the government to further ignore the hitherto most fund starved health sector. There is no escape but to substantially increase public spending on healthcare. Even NitiAayog believes the present health spending of the country is "low" as one of its members V K Paul has said it, adding that the situation must be corrected. Hopes are therefore high and it is most likely that allocation for the health sector will see a substantial swelling in the budget 2021-22.

Everybody in the government responsible for making the budget seems to be in favour of increasing allocation for the sector, but there are great financial limitations to it, since all the severely contracted economy needs increased amount of allocation to revive the economy, which was completely at a halt, and has just started moving again, albeit at a very slow pace. Revival of the economy is expected soon, and the economy will bounce back in the financial year 2021-21, as economists generally agree.

This makes the budget making task a little easy, because a buoyancy in revenues is expected in the coming year, which will give enough elbow room to strengthen India's public healthcare budget which is presently the lowest in the world. According to international estimates, India needs to increase public spending on healthcare systems up to at least 10 per cent of the GDP, and according to some about 14 per cent against an average of 1.26 per cent for the last three years. United States spends over 16 per cent, and many other countries like Japan, Canada, France, Germany, Switzerland, Australia etc are already spending about 9-10 per cent of their GDP.

It is a shame for India that the government does not want to spend more on this sector while even neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan are spending over 3 per cent of their GDP on healthcare. One should also note that emergency spending, such as every country needed to spend this year on this sector, is not included in the level of spending that has previously been mentioned. The Modi government intends to increase health expenditure of the country to only 2.5 per cent and that too by 2025. It indicates the unwillingness of the ruling establishment to spend more at the moment and also its capacity limitation due to lack of revenue, which has dwindled to a new low in 2020-21. However, we must do something even if we

need to take domestic and international loans.

The first major task of the government is to strengthen the health infrastructure of the country which was overwhelmed during the coronavirus pandemic. We had to make makeshift arrangements by converting public buildings such as schools and stadiums into hospitals. The government has already planned establishment of hospitals to deal especially with virus infections in every district of the country by 2022 with financial support from the World Bank. However, it will not be sufficient because there are heavy shortages of hospitals for other diseases, at all levels right from the villages to the cities, even in those cities which now house several great hospitals such as our national capital Delhi.

Apart from increasing the number of hospital infrastructure, upgradation of the existing ones is badly required. Many of our public hospitals are in very bad shape. There is a lack of space, beds, equipment, or even stretchers for patients to simply lie on for treatment and examinations in case of emergencies. It is important because most of the people in our country need to go to public hospitals since they don't have enough money to go to private hospitals. The pandemic has given us a lesson that if any person is in danger, everyone is in danger even if one is rich enough to spend any amount of money on preservation of their health. Public healthcare thus must be the priority in the budget 2021-22.

The pandemic has also exposed the lack of sufficient number of medical professionals and healthcare workers in the country. A large workforce is required to be trained in this profession to enable the country to deal with the present as well as future emergencies. For this we need to open more medical and nursing colleges in the country. Sanitation, hygiene and preventive healthcare training centres are also required. There must be special provisions for this in this very budget, for the country can no longer wait.

Since we don't have sufficient funds to do all that, the budget must try to attract huge private investment in our healthcare system by way of giving financial support and other incentives. However, the government should also do something to stop exploitation of patients by private hospitals that has been reportedly on the increase. Since private hospitals also run with government help, such as through land allotment, access to public money through banks etc, it must be ensured that these hospitals are also accessible, equitable, and affordable for the common people. Public healthcare systems also need such measures to ease the burden and heavy load and to make them transparent.

All the existing programmes need to be strengthened. These require substantial increase in budget allocations, but unfortunately as reported, the government is likely to increase it to only by about 40 per cent, which was only 69,000 crore rupees for this fiscal. It would be only a drop in the ocean compared to the massive challenges in the health system. The Union government allocated an additional about 24,500 crore rupees in 2020 to deal with the pandemic over and above the original budget allocation for 2020-21. (IPA Service)

TO THE EDITOR

Who will reform the MPSC?

Editor,
On December 14, 2020, MPSC published an advertisement for 328 posts lying vacant under various State Government Departments. Here, I would like to caution the educated unemployed not to feel elated for it will take an eternity before these posts are filled up. For instance, MPSC conducted written exams on December 10, 2020 for posts advertised way back in April 2016. Further, drawing from past experience, it will take another eternity before results are declared and interviews conducted. For our MPSC, this is not an aberration but the norm. In contrast, the Staff Selection Commission rarely exceeds one year after publication of advertisement to appoint its staff. The State Bank of India Recruitment Board and the Institute of Bank Personnel Selection take 5-6 months and 7-8 months respectively to complete the entire process of recruitment. The above three Recruitment Agencies always mention the Exams Calendars and stick to such Calendars while our MPSC never mentions any Exams Calendars in any of its advertisements. It appears that MPSC can afford to abdicate its responsibilities towards the unemployed because there is no demand

for accountability from the unemployed themselves and from society at large. Our elected representatives and various students' unions and youth councils cannot be faulted because they have much more weighty issues to pursue.

When it comes to reforms, MPSC is at best a laggard. In this regard, these columns published my letter on May 25, 2018 under the heading, "When will Meghalaya abolish interviews," drawing attention to a news report which appeared in The Shillong Times dated May 19, 2018 headlined, "Centre slams nine states over slow progress in abolishing job interviews." The report inter alia mentioned that the Centre censured nine states including Meghalaya for not abolishing oral interviews to Group B (non-gazetted) and to all Group C and D posts in line with what the Central Government has done since January 1, 2016 to bring transparency and fair selection as well as provide a level playing field for job aspirants from all sections and backgrounds. The above Shillong Times report also mentioned that this issue was discussed with the Principal Secretaries/ Secretaries of General Administration Departments of all states at a meeting held on April 22, 2016 in New Delhi.

It is noted that almost all States and Union Territories have abolished oral

interviews for the mentioned categories of posts consequent to Letter NO 39020/ 09/ 2015-Esst(B) dated 28th January 2016 circulated to all States and Union Territories by the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions. This letter is in the public domain and can be accessed from the said Ministry's website. Significantly, the above letter also refers to correspondence dated September 4, 2015 and September 29, 2015 from the Secretary (Personnel) of the mentioned Central Ministry addressed to all Chief Secretaries and from the Minister of State addressed to all Chief Ministers requesting them to ensure that no more oral job interviews should be undertaken for the mentioned categories of posts.

Under the above circumstances, it appears that the more things change elsewhere in India, they remain the same here in the Abode of the Clouds and that 'We The People,' cannot do anything about it. Can we?

Yours etc.,
Samuel Swett,
Shillong-2.

On matri-lineage

Editor,
Apropos Albert Thyrniang's article, "Is Matrilineal Lineage under question?" (ST Jan, 19,

2021), I would like to bring in my views pertaining to our Matrilineal Lineage.

I am afraid, Mr Thyrniang, matrilineal is not just a name especially for us the female gender. In fact matrilineal carries a lot of sentiments attached to us. Firstly, from day one of our existence, as a foetus it is the woman who bears us while her whole world changes entirely along with the changes in her body. At the end of nine months, she goes through the process of bringing her baby into this world. Therefore, as a woman, I fail to understand as to why can't she have the honour of giving her last name to the child she has given birth and life to?

Secondly, our ancestors are truly intelligent and far sighted to have understood the importance of a woman as a custodian and bearer of the family wherein she binds them together and acts as a shield in preserving the name of her family. Perhaps due to this reason they acknowledged her contribution and thereby blessed her with this opportunity to get a fair share in the society by allowing the child to be known after her clan name. In the long run, her name lives forever.

Thirdly, I have travelled the world and I do not miss a single chance of telling other citizens and communities of the world about our unique and beautiful matrilineal system. All would be surprised to

know but their response had always been a "wow" and "awesome". Some have actually wished they are a part of our society that confers so much respect to a woman, placing her high on a pedestal. Let us not follow the crowd and ruin our uniqueness otherwise we will no longer stand unique. I agree we need to accommodate changes with the passage of time but there are a few things that are better left untouched or else not only will the beauty of it will go away but also the essence of our very existence will fade.

To conclude, the whole world celebrates the March 8 as International Woman's Day, but I feel we the residents of Meghalaya celebrates or empower our women daily because of our matrilineal culture.

Yours etc.,
Leezandra Dkhar,
New Delhi -31

Public transport blues

Editor,
Through this column I would like to highlight an important issue regarding daily commuters in our State. The Transport Department of the Government of Meghalaya had issued a notification regarding the seating capacity and fares for different categories of vehicles which it had stated shall stand reverted to the fares prior to Covid, with immediate effect. A question

arises as to whether the public will be vigilant enough to stake claim to the benefits issued by the Government in public interest? For it is common knowledge that in our State the public is complacent in nature, which leads to loss of benefit to the public.

Yours etc.,
S O Myrthong,
Via email

Taxi super-bosses

Editor,
As someone who commutes to work daily on public transport I was relieved when the Government made an announcement that taxi and bus fares would revert to the old pre-Covid rates. Sadly on Monday I took a cab from Polo to Shiyap Golf Links and was charged the same double rate that is Rs 20 instead of the old rate of Rs 10. When I questioned the driver he nonchalantly said that the cab was not utilized to its full capacity but he mentioned this only after I had reached my destination. Even the passengers in the cab who were regular commuters were surprised by the rate. This almost led to a heated argument. I request the authorities concerned to kindly look into this matter so that those of us who commute in public transport would be freed from these draconian taxi bosses.

Yours etc.,
Marbiangki Nkhla,
Via email

"Humanitarian response, sustainable development, and sustaining peace are three sides of the same triangle."

— Antonio Guterres

The Shillong Times

Vol No: LXIII No. 164 SHILLONG, FRIDAY, JANUARY 29, 2021

Covid-19 now on the run

THE real good news is finally in – which is that the Union Health Ministry has confidently proclaimed on Thursday that the Covid-19 pandemic is now firmly "under control" in the country. The rise in infection rates has been curbed for the past one week and the Covid graph is spectacularly on the downward slide for a month or so. Some 146 of the 718 districts have reported no new cases for a week and 18 districts for two weeks.

This has happened even as the vaccination programme is yet to reach out to the masses. The jabs so far were limited to frontline Covid warriors in the form of healthcare staff and security personnel, numbering over 2.4 million in all. Even then, Covid-19 seems ready to pack its bag and go its way. This positive turn happens from a high of India being the world's second most-affected nation. India has so far reported nearly 11 million infections and over 1.50 lakh deaths linked to the pandemic.

Anti-body tests showed that some 50 per cent of the population were already infected and thus acquired natural immunity. This is also a significant aspect, seen against the WHO ruling that immunity for 60 per cent of the population will help break the chain of virus transmission.

Importantly, the new UK strain of Covid-19 too failed to spread in India so far, due mainly to strict controls effected at airports and other entry points. While weeks have passed since the first such case was detected here, the number of the infected stands at around 165 now, who were isolated and provided with quarantine. Most states are now reporting daily Covid positive figures at the May-June level. Worst-hit Maharashtra too has reined in the virus spread and begun reporting lower figures of daily infections and deaths in recent weeks.

Some 70 per cent of the present daily cases of Covid infections are coming from just two states – Maharashtra and Kerala – the total of daily infections across states being of the order of some 12,000, of which nearly half the number were from Kerala alone. This too means that a sense of normalcy can be expected soon, a confidence boosted by the start of the vaccination drive. India has readied itself to vaccinate some 30 crore people by the middle of this year. All these go to stress the point that the worst is over and we can now look forward to a revival of normal activities across the globe sooner than later.

TO THE EDITOR

Drawing urgent attention of MeECL

Editor,
Apropos the letter "Frequent power cuts: MeECL needs recharging" by Salil Gewali (ST Jan 26, 2021), the writer narrates the problems faced by the residents of Shillong due to frequent electricity disruption. As mentioned by Gewali, most of the employees of corporate companies who have returned to Shillong on the assurance of working from home have been affected badly. I am an employee myself and have faced this issue on almost a daily basis. Firstly, there are no fixed timings regarding the power cuts. Secondly the power cuts occur almost every alternate day. Sometimes my meetings are being affected and at other times the targets aren't met on time. This is not just my problem but the problem of almost all the employees working from home in Shillong. What I want to

underline here is that there is every chance that our respective jobs might be impacted badly if the same condition prevails since we cannot perform well from home. I have also seen that employees are now called back or compelled to return to the various cities from where they had come home. This is bringing a bad name to the state. Then there are the board examinations of Classes 10 and 12 which have been recently declared by various educational boards. The students here are also having online classes on a regular basis and in such a crucial time it is more important for the students to be provided with better electricity and good network connectivity. Frequent power cuts are disrupting their studies and affecting their concentration. Another major issue that I have experienced regarding telecom companies is that as soon as the electricity goes off the internet speed on these networks comes to a crawl and one can hardly download one small

Meghalaya is a state with over 6000 villages and only 16 towns. Sometimes it's easy to forget these basic facts and to live in the bubble called Shillong or Tura, Jowai, Nongpoh, Nongstoin or Mawklyrwat. The real problem with Meghalaya and its lacklustre development is that nearly all of its elected representatives live in Shillong. Some are blissfully unaware of the cruel hardships faced by their constituents and therefore cannot empathise with them. But it's also a fact that elections in Meghalaya and indeed the whole country no longer depends on the 5-year performance of the MLA/MDC/MP. It rests solely on the ability of the candidates to pay their voters while seeking votes. Most MLAs representing rural Meghalaya have not visited all of the villages in their constituencies. The villagers also admit that they see the MLA's face only when he/she comes to seek re-election. In that sense we are a flawed democracy.

Elections today are a high stake game where only those with several crores stacked away neatly in their lockers can afford to play. Others with lesser or no resources will be swept out of the way. Being an MLA means having access to the MLA scheme which turns an MLA into a businessman/contractor. Former Home Minister, RG Lyngdoh had repeatedly stated that the MLA scheme is a grand deception on the people of Meghalaya. The money allocated vide the MLA scheme is not spent as it should for constructing or repairing roads and footpaths, to provide water connections or to build and maintain schools especially in the villages. Looking at the schools one wonders how the kids can spend several hours inside those dingy rooms that are leaking during the rainy season. Most MLAs have not seen such schools and therefore don't feel the pain. They are emotionally distant from their constituents who they treat as clients that need to be serviced only intermittently. It's also the fault of the constituents that they treat the MLA/MDC/MP as some distant benefactor – a patron who gives them money to pay their hospital fees or buy school books for their children but will not ensure that the public health system is fully functional in each village or will ensure that poor children have access to free books.

Take the case of Kongthong which is about 56 Kms from Shillong but because of the road condition, takes anything be-

Meghalaya's rural challenge

By Patricia Mukhim

tween 2.5 to 3 hours to commute. There is just one dispensary in the village which is serviced only by nurses. When the villagers suffer from serious ailments that require a proper check-up they have to come to Shillong using the scarce public transport which during the pandemic costs them Rs 300 both ways. In fact, the health services in Meghalaya are one of the worst in the country as per the NFHS-5. Recently, Chief Minister Conrad Sangma informed on Meghalaya Day that at least five mothers and 30 children die every week in the State. That this should happen in the 21st century is disgraceful but that's where Meghalaya is placed. The Chief Minister deserves kudos for not shying away from stating the ugly facts

You will find a primary school but the villagers are conned into believing that the primary school is what they deserve and should not aspire for more. To think of a High School in a village is a big deal. So after primary school the kids either have to walk miles to the next village closer to the Block HQ or drop out because parents cannot afford the transport fares and their children refuse to walk several kilometres each way. Their dreams are killed early. Only those with fortitude refuse to give up and manage to scale the peak and educate themselves through sheer will power.

It is a travesty that MLAs representing rural constituencies with hardly any roads are themselves living in mansions and gated residential complexes that the

education system that does not encourage questioning. The churches too operate in a top-down manner where questioning is taboo. The Khasi society too is constructed in such a way that questioning or dissent is equated with insolence. Anyone who speaks up is immediately isolated and becomes the talking point. This is because we have not transcended our cultural prejudices and stereotypes. Many of us still take the adage, "Silence is Golden" literally.

On another note, Meghalaya was gifted a central university in 1974. It was meant to be a centre of higher education for students from the seven states and the rest of the country. Now, after every state in the region has managed to get a university of their own, NEHU has degenerated into a Khasi University. NEHU is only two years younger to Meghalaya but instead of a garden of opportunities it has turned into a fortress that entraps all those within it in orthodoxy, indifference and disrespect for civic polity when the need of the hour is to prepare students for a mercenary society and an unpredictable future. Education is pointless if it does not equip students with the tools to deal with complex threats and challenges and instead imprisons them inside carefully constructed and vigorously defended walls. I am saying this because not one scholar from NEHU has designed to give us insights on what the Inner Line Permit entails and its larger consequences. If the academia shies away from these critical issues then are they worth their salaries? The students too know their professors have no view on any issue because they are too self-absorbed.

Democracy cannot succeed if the citizenry is uninformed. And how will the citizens be informed if the intellectual elite distance themselves from issues that have a bearing on the state and its people. It is the educated that have the onus of critiquing policies and governance. It is they who should be calling out the illegals under the present dispensation which have resulted in two mining disasters. If the educated don't engage with issues of our day and the ferment of our times then we might as well wait for a revolution. That misguided revolution happened once in the 1990s; the next one might be more evolved because it will be led by those who have been deprived of their rights and suffered injustice for far too long. Woe betide if that happens!

"For too long, Meghalaya has produced MLAs who see politics as a family entitlement. If the parents are in politics then the children automatically step into politics. The electoral expenses needed have already been accumulated by the parents by cornering the resources meant to service the poor whose votes they solicit."

upfront. He is not responsible for this abysmal state of affairs. The statistics cited have been constant in Meghalaya for several decades now because (a) primary health centres are not adequately strengthened (b) there are not enough doctors to be posted in each PHC (c) even if doctors are posted at a PHC or CHC they are not provided decent living quarters or transport. How does a doctor attend to an emergency in a distant place when he/she is not even allocated a vehicle? Compare doctors to other categories of employees such as those working in the Police, Forest, Soil, PHE, PWD, Agriculture Departments. They are all allotted vehicles; doctors are not. Successive governments have not given health service the priority it deserves. Mothers and children die of preventable deaths caused by anaemia, malnutrition, absence of child spacing and poor reproductive health. The health seeking behaviour of women is such that they consider their health as the last priority.

Meghalaya has several villages that involve trekking on foot for hours together. Think how the sick traverse this rough terrain.

rural poor will not be allowed to enter or dare enter. Elections can no longer be an instrument to empower the MLA and his family only, while the constituents wither away due to sheer poverty and inability to meet their basic needs. This is why India needs another freedom movement. The next freedom movement will be to free the millions of Indians from an enforced imprisonment in the cage of poverty – a poverty that is the result of concentration of resources in the hands of the elite. For too long, Meghalaya has produced MLAs who see politics as a family entitlement. If the parents are in politics then the children automatically step into politics. The electoral expenses needed have already been accumulated by the parents by cornering the resources meant to service the poor whose votes they solicit.

The fact that Meghalaya has received thousands of crores from the Centre over the years for constructing roads and bridges but that these roads and bridges are invisible should make us angry. But we aren't and we continue to vote the same people and the same old party. There's something drastically wrong with our

wish to take the clan name of their father or mother. The children and wives of civil servants (IAS, IPS, IFS) that I know always take their father's surname because it is difficult to explain this to those that don't follow this culture. I see no wrong in this. Society should be flexible and individuals in it should be allowed to adopt the surname of either parents or of both. And before we go gaga over the matrilineal system, I dare say that while it has served us well there are also glaring defects in it that we must have the courage to address. But knowing how finicky our society is about tradition despite the glaring ills in it I wonder if we will ever have the courage to change.

Yours etc.,
Joycee Lyngdoh,
Via email

Articles and letters appearing on this page are the views of the writers/authors and not that of The Shillong Times

Mr whatsapp chat's nationalist collective gamble

Arnab Goswami is now biggest danger to democratic dissent

By Sushil Kutty

Was what happened in Red Fort, Delhi on January 26 comparable to what happened on January 6 in Capitol Hill, Washington DC? In Delhi and in India, it's being talked of as if the farmers' protests warped into insurrection and that the fullest punishment should be meted out to the "guilty" with the full force of the law. Strangely, the person shouting from the top of his lungs for the immediate arrests of "farmers' leaders" is none other than the guy who was recently bailed out by the Supreme Court with Justice DY Chandrachud declaring that "We must send a message today to the high courts as well: Please exercise your jurisdiction to uphold personal liberty."

Justice Chandrachud said high courts were denying personal liberty in cases across India and that if the Supreme Court did not interfere, then "they will walk on the path of destruction." And with those words Arnab Goswami accused of abetment to suicide walked free with the top court's interim bail in his pocket. This is the same Goswami who was screaming "I'll be killed" through the barred window of a moving police van heading for Navi Mumbai's Talaja Jail. That balmy morning, Arnab Goswami was crapping bricks and all those who heard his plaintive cry wanted release for the poor fellow – nobody should be robbed of his personal liberty. Nobody, not even Arnab Goswami!

And look at what Mr. Plaintiff now wants. The personal liberties of a slew of farmers' leaders snatched away. From that of the deceptively soft-spoken Yogendra Yadav to the brash and loud Rakesh Tikait to that of the lady rebel for all causes Medha Patkar, Arnab Goswami wants all of them jailed, preferably under the most stringent of laws. For Yogendra Yadav, for whom Goswami has a special affinity, Arnab wants the UAPA! And guess what, the very next morning after the night (January 26) Goswami voiced the demand on his TV show, there were reports that Yadav could indeed be slapped with the god-awful Unlawful Activities Prevention Act. Talk about coincidences!!

The Republic TV media baron is turning out to be quite a character. There is no provision in law but, if there's one, Arnab Goswami should forthwith be held without bail and to hell with "they will walk on the path of destruction." Anybody who wishes ill of others and from which he himself cringes deserves nobody's sympathy. Arnab Goswami is a clear and present danger to the personal liberties of tens of hundreds of Indians, people who will refuse to pander to his warped sense of "nationalism."

And now he has launched what he calls the "Nationalist Collective" – a grouping of "nationalist Indians" from all walks of life, from all across the world who will come together to fight India's enemies. There's conspiracy afoot, declares Goswami, his words echoing that of the tinfoil hats of the 1970-80s who used to bring up the imaginary doings of the "foreign hand" at every throw of the dice, a gamble that mostly got called and exposed at every show of the hand.

Now, if that does not get your goat, consider this: According to the "Nationalist Collective" all the farmers who sat to picket Delhi for 60-plus days are anti-nationals. In fact, everybody who does not agree with "army officer's son Arnab Goswami" is an anti-na-

tional! Q.E.D. Goswami's powerful urge to see people who do not gel with his thoughts, jailed is egregious, horrifying – shocking. Megalomania?

Forget that. For now, worry about the classification 'nationalist' and 'anti-national.' The classification is being done by those who have declared themselves "good Indians." Those who do not know to their ideology are "bad Indians."

January 27, 2021 on Republic TV, Goswami held forth on the 'Nationalist Collective.' With 10 guests and himself on the show it was a football team. "We cannot be bystanders anymore," Arnab told the "muted three" who made up the "anti-national" representation on the show. The trio shouted at the top of their voices but they could not be heard or were even allowed to speak. Arnab's nationalists consisting of a retired general, a Goa journalist, a Kashmiri pandit, a lawyer and a couple of others shouted the anti-nationalist down and Arnab helped them along. It was primetime television bullying at its best.

But what was on show on television was mild compared to what Goswami promises with his Nationalist Collective: "Yesterday it was rioters in the name of farmers. Tomorrow, it will be Maoists and Mapist-terrorists, and the day after, it could be radicalized terrorists or any other such group. We cannot allow anti-national elements to plunder our country anymore. We are believers in democracy. Our democracy will not survive if it is not fought for and defended with all the force at our command. We must, therefore, rally together and expose the intentions of the enemy."

The Democrats and the US mainstream media have labelled the people who swarmed the US Capitol on January 6 "domestic terrorists." Here, we have Goswami's 'Nationalist Collective' branding farmers who picketed Delhi the enemies of India, anti-nationals. The question is did somebody take a leaf out of the January 6 Capitol Hill playbook and apply it to India's farmers and their Republic Day tractor rally? Again, whose agenda does it suit? Now the farmers have no place to run. Passports of their leaders are being flagged and suddenly the police are as if they had had their fill of oats!

"Today, there is an urgent need for all Nationalists to come together as a Collective. We, the Nationalists of India, having realized the intentions of the anti-nationals need to join hands to take them on. Our democracy is under threat... I am announcing the launch of the Nationalist Collective... The Nationalist Collective will be an Instrument in the Defence of the Nation. The Nationalist Collective will emphasise the need to connect all Indians with the glue of Nationalist fervour, Nationalist spirit, Nationalist pride, and Nationalist common intent," says Arnab Goswami in shrill hysteria.

The question is should we all flock to Goswami's 'Nationalist Collective' and attain nirvana, or will all of us who do not do so be targeted? But who gave Arnab Goswami the right to judge a person's nationalism/patriotism. In some ways, it is good that Arnab Goswami calls himself only a "nationalist." The day he insists he is a patriot is when he should be cuffed to the bedpost. This is the same fellow whose nationalism went out the window in a Whatsapp chat.(IPA Service)

"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

— Mahatma Gandhi

The Shillong Times

Vol No: L.XIII No. 165 SHILLONG, SATURDAY, JANUARY 30, 2021

Meghalaya's polluted rivers

MEGHALAYA Chief Minister Conrad Sangma had tweeted on Friday that the State Government had discussions with a private company - AG Group to rejuvenate and enhance the water quality of Wah Umkhrach on accelerated phycoremediation using nano nutrient technology. Phycoremediation in simple language means using microalgae or macroalgae for removal or bio-transformation of pollutants, including nutrients, xenobiotics and carbon monoxide from wastewater. The Water Resources Department will in all probability be the lead department to take forward this project.

Shillong's two major rivers the Wah Umkhrach and Umshyri have borne the brunt of anthropogenic activities. Attempts to clean these two rivers including by different groups and by the Government and the Khasi Hills District Council have not resulted in any tangible results because people residing along the banks of the two rivers use them to dump garbage and empty their sewers. It's not as if people are not aware of the environmental consequences of polluting the two rivers both of which flow into the Umiam Lake and cause major silting, thereby reducing the life-span of the lake. In 2019 a Committee of the Meghalaya Assembly on Environment found that the life of the polluted Umiam Lake has been reduced by 41 years from 100 years. Umiam Lake is now able to generate power only up to 2024. The Committee after inspecting the Umiam Lake found that the adverse impact on the life of the lake was because of huge deposit of garbage and silt.

In 2019, the Umiam Lake saw a barrage of plastics landing on it because the wall at Marten dumping ground had collapsed. At that time the High Court had intervened in the matter and the MeECL and State Pollution Control Board reported that things have been sorted out. But most of the garbage has settled at the bottom of the lake. The State Pollution Board had given its opinion that the Umkhrach and Umshyri rivers have become open sewers. The two rivers are over-burdened not only with liquid waste but with tons of solid waste which include plastic that drain into the Lake. According to MeECL officials the quantity of silt deposited is about 0.5 Million Cubic Meter every year.

In this situation unless the matter is taken seriously, Meghalaya will not only lose an important power generation facility but will also find that the toxicity of the water in the two rivers becoming a hazard to the overall health of the environment. What also needs urgent attention are the other rivers in the length and breadth of Meghalaya. The Umiew River in Smit which flows to the Mawphlang dam and ultimately reaches the Greater Shillong Water Supply System is now being used for washing vehicles day in and day out. The toxicity of the Umiew River can well be imagined. It is imperative therefore that the Government of Meghalaya pays attention to its rivers. It's now or never!

Ruling establishment is afraid of dissent and democratic protests

Ominous signs in India in the functioning of NDA Govt

By Revathi Siva Kumar

Protests do not really seem to win many victories for any side today. Even though the government agreed to finally hold back farm laws for a year and a half, farmers refused to back off on their demand for repeal. Dissenters were convinced that the state was quietly digging in its heels, though it officially offered to push a 'pause' button.

Whatever be the decision, the centre seems to bridle at opponents, which it does not consider to voice anything of value.

Professing to move 'forward', the government dislikes just anyone who comes in its way. Amitabh Kant, Niti Aayog CEO, through a major Freudian slip - which he considers just a slip of the tongue that was taken out of context - precisely revealed the central line of thought in an exasperated flash on December 8. He said that "tough reforms are very difficult in the Indian context, we have too much of democracy..."

Though he later backtracked and tried to modify his statement, he made the ruling party's intentions clear. The centre is at best irritated with the republic and at worst is aiming for its very antithesis - more control.

Democracy is defined by the right to raise dust and create conflict, so it is usually a battle between the masses and the government, in which the dice gets loaded against the people. Hence, it is obvious that "too much democracy" would certainly be the healthy and necessary stand to take in larger public interest.

India has slipped in its global ranking and credentials. Dropping 10 ranks below the 51st position, out of 165 independent countries in the 2019 Democracy Index, has clearly been a major downgrade. The main cause of the "democratic regression has been the erosion of civil liberties".

In the World Press Freedom Index, 2020, India got one pat on the back with the note that there were no mur-

ders of journalists in India in 2019, as against six in 2018. So, the security situation for the country's media might seem, on the face of it, to have improved. However, due to "constant press freedom violations, including police violence against journalists, ambushes by political activists, and reprisals instigated by criminal groups or corrupt local

In the recent agreement to stall the 'reforms' and set up an examining body, there is no surety that the Centre would not plant its own spokespersons, exactly parallel to the earlier expert committee to explore the reforms.

While earlier, people would agree to sit across the table and work out some acceptable solutions, these so-called "expert commit-

flated perspective in his TV shows. Hence, while it is clear that the 'Republic' channel is a glorified government loudspeaker, it has hijacked the media 'constitutionally'.

Even the Supreme Court supported Arnab Goswami in an abatement of suicide case and ruled, ironically, that criminal law should not become a weapon of "selective harassment of citizens". The iron hand in the velvet glove is clear. The government abhors democracy, yet it goes through the motions of democratic processes.

The battle-lines are sharply drawn. Opponents are the most "audible" voices from the pain points setting the nation on fire, but they are also symbolic of the chaos, conflict and confusion that are now dismissed as "too much democracy" by the government, seen more as roadblocks to the ruling party's motives of 'growth'.

Whether protestors are creating an ideological revolution or are just voices speaking up from the ground, the state reprises first with charges of 'anti-nationalism' and uses - or rather abuses - the framework of democracy.

It puts in place the rules and regulations of its own carefully worked out plan favouring corporates and ideological allies, even though it is equally careful to pull the rug out from under the substance of democracy.

The signs, then, are ominous. Opponents no longer seem to trust that the government would retain anything more than the shell of democracy while discarding the substance. The issue then is not whether there is too much, or too little of it. The question is whether democracy would survive at all. Given that an institutional head snapped at the idea of 'democracy' itself and is ruling that there is an overkill of it, the state's paranoia and frustration is clear. A dissenter, therefore, feels less like a brave David shaking the gates and more like a frustrated prisoner rattling his chains. (IPA Service) Courtesy: The Leaflet

Democracy Index 2019



officials...", India dropped two places in the global press freedom index.

Therefore, if the government finds "too much democracy" in India, it is not even being accurate in its assessment.

Yet, in its doublethink, the government cannot be seen to be dictatorial, so it ironically professes to be democratic and uses legal and apparently liberal levers to actually stifle the

teens" no longer seem to be credible. People immediately smell a rat. No ear is lent for people's protests, but the state gets its unofficial 'allies', including many in the courts and godi media, to drag in "democratic" solutions.

Other events shaking the nation, as well as the government's reactions, repeat the pattern, giving a bifocal perspective on issue management. The government's

"Democracy is defined by the right to raise dust and create conflict, so it is usually a battle between the masses and the government, in which the dice gets loaded against the people."

republic. This pattern seems to repeat itself in a number of events.

On June 5, ordinances for the farm laws were passed by the government, without talking to the opposition or the stakeholders, yet they were done in Parliament.

Just a fortnight ago, 30 kisan unions rejected a committee of four "experts" who seemed to be mere echo chambers of the official point of view, though it was set up by the Supreme Court to examine the laws.

attacks on the environment have been relentless and India has become the "fourth worst country" out of 180 in the last five years, according to the Environmental Performance Index, but PM Modi announces that India is on track to exceed the targets of the Paris Agreement.

'Arnaagate' reveals a TV anchor's leaked WhatsApp chats and shows him admitting in private that Modi had "screwed up" the economy, yet he always gave an in-

eagerness to send our children to these institutes rather than "outsiders", and in our quest for providing teaching jobs to our own kith and kin, we have ensured that Shillong's fair name as an educational nerve-centre is demolished. And the creation of NEHU hasn't helped either, except for churning out degree-holders without employability!

In the 1980's when Meghalaya adopted all primary schools hitherto run by the KHADC, the government with one stroke of the pen picked up a huge liability of monthly salaries for teachers who were employed left, right and centre on sheer political consideration. While the salary bill went up a few notches, the quality of primary education was compromised. Aren't we seeing the result? Our tribal students suffer from weak foundation in language, composition, arithmetic which matter in the higher classes. They struggle all the way and by some quirk of fate find themselves on the right side of the table. The cumulative effect is that our children, barring a small percentage, are struggling to reach the desired goals. After all, rote memory and nepotism have their own limitations.

The long and short of it is that our performance has been dismal and it should have been counted as negative in your write-up. Come to think of it, what is the achievement of Meghalaya in the education sector? I am told that 90% of the state's education budget is committed to paying salary to teachers. The state always had the excuse of funds crunch. To me this is plain lack of political will. Why didn't the state create a single State University? Perhaps, Meghalaya is one of the few states without one. Tragedy is that unlike Arunachal, Mizoram, Nagaland, in 1972 our state had a head-start which has dissipated over the decades. It would be good to know how many colleges and schools we have opened during the past 50 years. How well are they running? I know colleges like Tura Government College, Kiang Nangbah College Jowai, Williamson Sangma College at Williamnagar etc., are afflicted by various maladies that seemingly defy redemption. I am also curious to know, what happened to the idea of setting up Pine-mount-type schools? The idea apparently died a premature death the day it began to be used as a job opportunity for our "own" job-

less. When the state can be so myopic in its approach, we cannot expect anything better.

Any which way we look at it, despite a significant rise in literacy levels, the overall education standard has plummeted in the state. Perhaps, that explains why for over a decade Meghalaya has been unable to produce a single student who could crack the UPSC exams. The bitter truth is that despite various concessions and facilities, there aren't students good enough to get through by merit and merit alone. I only hope and pray that some local entrepreneurs will muster courage to create alternative private institutions as franchisees of say DPS or Amity to rebuild a structure that would defy political pressure or arm-twisting methods of pressure groups to put up superlative schools and universities during the next fifty years to help Meghalaya restore its lost ground.

Yours etc.,
Name withheld on request,
Via email

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Mahatma Gandhi and Christianity

By Damankhraw. R. Dkhar

If not for Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the Indian Independence struggle would have taken longer with more bloodshed, division and war. When senior leaders of the Hindu political groups urged Gandhi to respond to 'violence with violence' and 'sword with sword', he opposed it and insisted and exhorted them to follow the path of non-violence and peace, which was Gandhi's biggest sword to combat the trained and fully equipped forces.

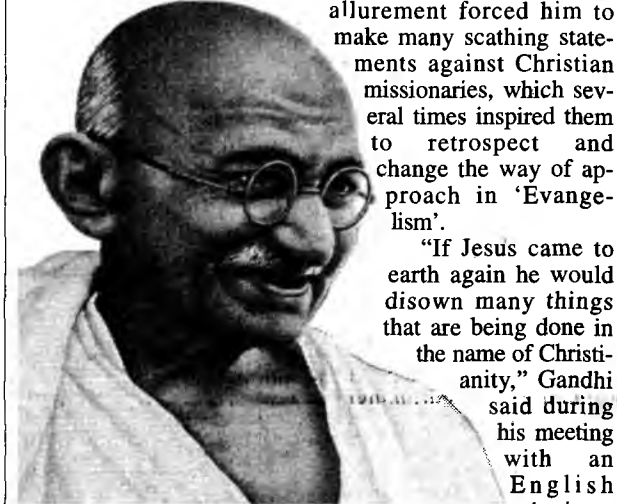
For sure this great man is one of the most respected leaders of modern history not only because of how he lived his life, but also because of his ideals and his message to the people. Although a Hindu, Gandhi had a very close connection with Christianity and admired Jesus very much, often quoting from his favourite 'Sermon on the Mount' (Mathew 5, 6 & 7). When the missionary E. Stanley Jones met with Gandhi he asked him, "Mr. Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is it that you appear so adamantly reject becoming his

know the Bible and who talk of its Ten Commandments..."

To a Christian missionary Gandhi once said, "To live the gospel is the most effective way most effective in the beginning, in the middle and in the end. ...Not just preach but live the life according to the light.... If, therefore, you go on serving people and ask them also to serve, they would understand. But you quote instead John 3:16 which says, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." and ask them to believe it, and that has no appeal to me, and I am sure people will not understand it...the Gospel will be more powerful when practiced and preached. A rose does not need to preach. It simply spreads its fragrance. The fragrance is its own sermon...the fragrance of religious and spiritual life is much finer and subtler than that of the rose."

In many ways Gandhi was right, the intense proselytization by Christian missionaries in India through force and allurements forced him to make many scathing statements against Christian missionaries, which several times inspired them to retrospect and change the way of approach in 'Evangelism'.

"If Jesus came to earth again he would disown many things that are being done in the name of Christianity," Gandhi said during his meeting with an English mission-



follower?"

Gandhi replied, "Oh, I don't reject Christ. I love Christ. It's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike Christ. If Christians would really live according to the teachings of Christ, as found in the Bible, all of India would be Christian today."

Gandhi's closeness with Christianity began when he was a young man practicing law in South Africa. Apart from being attached with the Christian faith, he intently studied the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, and was also seriously exploring becoming a Christian, which led him to his discovery of a small church gathering in his locality. These strongly entrenched Biblical teachings have always acted a panacea to many of India's problems during its freedom struggle.

After deciding to attend the church service in South Africa, he came across a racial barrier, the church barred him at the door. "Where do you think you're going, kaffir?" an English man asked Gandhi in a belligerent tone. Gandhi replied, "I'd like to attend worship here." The church elder snarled at him, "There's no room for kaffirs in this church. Get out of here or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps." This infamous incident forced Gandhi to never again consider being a Christian, but rather adopt what he found in Christianity and its founder Jesus Christ.

In a speech to Women Missionaries in 28th July 1925, he said, "...although I am myself not a Christian, as a humble student of the Bible, who approaches it with faith and reverence, I wish respectfully to place before you the essence of the Sermon on the Mount...There are thousands of men and women today who, though they may not have heard about the Bible or Jesus have more faith and are more god fearing than Christians who

ary. Here I am reminded of Sadhu Sundar Singh who is said to have done more to "indigenize" the churches of India than any figures in the twentieth century. "You have offered us Christianity in a Western cup... Give it to us in an Eastern bowl and we will drink of it," is a famous statement by Singh, who converted from Sikhism to Christianity after his personal experience with Jesus, who appeared in his room one morning in the year 1905, when he was just fifteen years old.

Stanley Jones once asked Gandhi: "How can we make Christianity naturalized in India, not a foreign thing, identified with a foreign government and a foreign people, but a part of the national life of India and contributing its power to India's uplift?" Gandhi responded with great clarity, "First, I would suggest that all Christians and missionaries begin to live more like Jesus Christ. Second, practice it without adulterating it or toning it down. Third, emphasize love and make it your working force, for love is central in Christianity. Fourth, study the non-Christian religions more sympathetically to find the good that is within them, in order to have a more sympathetic approach to the people."

Mahatma Gandhi truly was the pioneer of Satyagraha—resistance to tyranny through mass civil disobedience, firmly founded upon ahimsa or total non-violence which led India to independence and inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world. He is officially honored in India as the Father of the Nation. Gandhi was shot in Birla House compound in New Delhi at the age of 78. He was killed by Nathuram Godse, who had opposed Gandhi's views on the Partition of India. Hence his 72nd death anniversary on January 30, 2020 is commemorated in the country as Martyrs Day.

TO THE EDITOR

Rejoinder from SMB

Editor,
Apropos the letter to the editor by W.L. Lyngdoh former Chief Executive Officer, Shillong Municipal Board (SMB), published in the Shillong Times on 25th January 2021----- the Board would like to clarify as under: -

The SMB collects the Bio Medical Waste from all the hospitals and clinics in the City including from the areas outside the SMB jurisdiction. The waste is transported in a designated van which is fully equipped. The Bio Medical Waste Treatment and Disposal Facility at Marten which was commissioned in 2007 has been out of order and a new facility has been recently installed. The new facility is now currently under trial run and will be commissioned soon. During the lockdown period, especially with the pandemic in which some amount of waste is contaminated, the incinerable waste is incinerated at the electric crematorium. The rest are disposed of by deep-burial in accordance with the Bio Medical Waste Management Rules 2016. Instructions were issued to

all Bio-Medical Waste collectors not to deviate from the Rules and other instructions given by the office from time to time. The office of the SMB is committed to provide efficient services to the City and will continue to strive for improvement.

Yours etc.,
Chief Executive Officer
Shillong Municipal Board

Meghalaya's fall from grace

Editor,
Your by-lined column, "Meghalaya at 49: Where are we headed?" (ST Jan 22, 2021) has more negatives than positives about the state of the State. Although you started with some of the so called positives, I am afraid even these make for dismal reading. For example, you have listed several national institutes which have come up during the past few decades in the educational landscape of the state. But if these institutes are not mere showpieces, what are they? To be candid, these institutes like IIM, NIT etc have not exactly revolutionised our education system. I can say for sure these institutes have not made the slight-

India 2030: An optimistic decade ahead for nation

By Vishnu Makhijani

As the new decade begins, India stands at the crossroads of several simultaneous disruptions, writes Gautam Chikermane, an author who tracks the world of money, power and faith, in "India 2030 - The Rise of a Rajasic Nation", a compendium of 20 scholarly essays by thought leaders from diverse fields ranging from politics, economics and foreign policy to health care and energy who predict what the current decade has in store.

"From two aggressive neighbours -- authoritarian China and Islamist Pakistan -- that refuse to embrace peace, to new formations and alignments such as the Quad of the US, Japan, Australia and India to counter Beijing, the 2020s will shape a new regional order. Jobs and prosperity cannot come without the accompanying reforms; the recent labour and farm laws are a positive-disruptive start. The new education policy, again, will disrupt the sector, making it more flexible, student-focused and in tune with India's twenty-first century aspirations. The disruption in defence procurement will make weaponry more effective. It is not merely the Union government that will drive reforms; the state governments will add their bits," Chikermane writes in the Preface of the book, which has been published by Penguin.

He expands on this in the opening essay, "Forces: Consolidation of a Rajasic India"; ('rajasic' being one of the three 'gunas' or qualities of Hinduism and Sikhism that is associated with energy and ambition). This essay, in fact, masterfully distils the essence of the other 19 to explain the dynamic surge India will see in the 2020s in key areas ranging from the economy, to business, finance, international relations, China, the neighbourhood, dynasties, governance, bureaucracy, defence, diplomacy, media narratives and literature and cinema, et al.

THIS IS WHAT COULD BE IN STORE:

The economy: What the 1990s were to a pre-\$300 billion economy, the 2020s will be to the post-\$3 trillion India. A tenfold jump in GDP (pre-pandemic) riding an annual growth rate of 8 per cent has buoyed India to the position of the world's fifth-largest economy in three decades. If India can maintain this growth rate (in a post-pandemic world as has been forecast it would), it will be the world's fourth-largest economy by the middle of 2020 and the third-largest by the end of the decade.

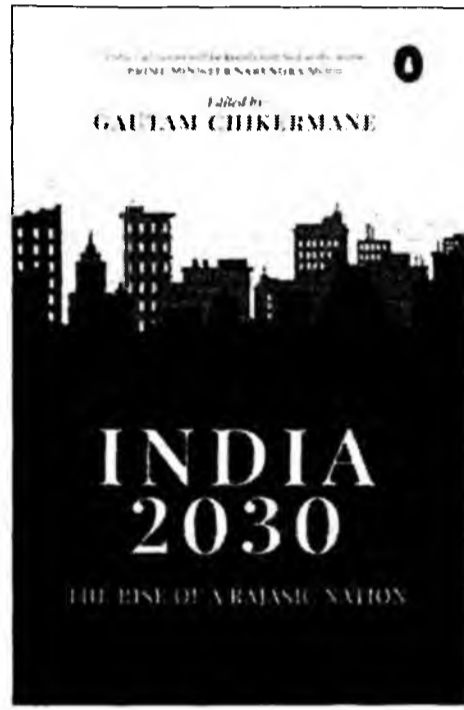
Regulatory cholesterol: The other change that will lead this economic transformation will be private enterprise. The challenges before it will not be accepted anymore. The decade ahead will see a rajasic surge against the excesses of the 1,535 laws that entrepreneurs have to contend with.

Business: To take just one example, Reliance Industries Ltd has shown how India's largest company can stand among the world's giants. Underlying its spectacular success and of several other companies large

and small, is the same rajasic force. These examples will increase both in number and in scale during the 2020s.

Finance: Household savings will see a definitive shift towards a greater perceived risk. From the safe confines of banks, money will move to riskier instruments such as equities.

International relations: India will be a shaper of global conversations rather than simply a taker of decisions. As the world explores a new world order beyond the UN, India will be a key architect. The rest of the world will need to understand the five changes in India's foreign policy: it will be more transactive, it will push the edges of risk, it will be more engaged, it will not tolerate intrusions, and it will not negotiate with terrorist states.



China: For far too long, India has been giving China a long rope, while China has been misusing this leeway and trying every possible way to keep India down, whether by weaponising trade or through its UN Security Council veto. Ladakh ended India's strategic patience with China. And with it ended the various related economic conversations. China is now seeking a face-save and India is not handing it. The tipping point has been crossed to a stage of no return.

The US: Despite its own hegemonic aspirations, the US is a country that now wants and needs India by its side. While the economy and the accompanying market is the prime reason, strategic balancing in Asia is now a relationship foretold. Initiatives like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) are only the tip of the iceberg.

The neighbourhood: A robust economy will catalyse stronger relationships with neighbours. Countries such as Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka, which have drifted towards China, will make a comeback. The glue that will bind them to India will be transactional economic benefits driven by values of non-predatory capitalism, democracy and culture.

Grand strategy: This is an all-encompassing idea that will support India's national security goals while

shaping the international order through high economic growth, energy security and internal stability domestically, and influence the regional and global security discourse outside.

Dynasties: Political dynasts will have a hard time coping with an impatient electorate. Working from the ground up will be the new currency of engagement with the people. In every sector, from Bollywood to the media, from the judiciary to business, Indians will demand greater accountability and performance.

Governance: The government has made huge investments in democratising governance. Any citizen anywhere has access to and demands instant action on Twitter. Governments are reaching out to citizens directly. Gone is the need for intermediaries and views. This will strengthen in the 2020s.

Union-State relations: A deeper democratic discourse will ensure that decision-making gets decentralised in the 2020s. The decade ahead will see a further acceleration of this trend towards the states. Political tensions may continue, but governance matrices will be better managed.

Bureaucracy: The face of India's bureaucracy will begin to change in the 2020s. This will be the most difficult and most contested change. By the middle of the decade, a new model will have been re-imagined, and by the end of the 2020s, it will be in place. Lateral entry of experienced and knowledgeable professionals will widen in scope. A revolving door will allow for private sector experience for public sector workers.

Taxes: Once the governance structures are rethought, trust deficit in the administrative pipelines reduced and the bureaucracy reoriented to deliver services rather than to seek rent, India's tax-GDP ratio will begin to rise. After GST in 2017, the 2020s will see the introduction of the direct taxes code.

Laws: India's patience with rampant poverty is over. Middlemen, anchored to rent extraction, will be increasingly isolated. To survive the 2020s, they will need to provide greater value. Citizens will demand easier routes to self-employment, small and medium enterprises will insist on clearing the hurdles to doing business, while big corporations will seek global scale.

Defence: There is a definitive and visible shift in India's direction and stance, broadly broken into two eras, life before 2019 (the bombing of a CRPF convoy that claimed the lives of 40 troops and the retaliatory Balakot strike deep inside Pakistani territory. With this attack, India has made a permanent and irreversible change in its military policy, including calling out Pakistan's nuclear bluff, which had been looming over relations for decades. This is the same rajasic force that is in action in Ladakh against China and will continue to play out in the decades ahead.

Diplomacy: The Balakot attack was supported by a diplomatic outreach. Apart from the end of functioning within narrow administrative silos, this proactive engagement told the world that something had shifted for good in India. This will continue in several other areas, notably trade, multilateral institutions and an overall global outreach.

Tyranny of transparency: Along with accountability, transparency will also raise hurdles. Managing disclosures will be one of the biggest challenges for governments in the decade ahead. A new equilibrium will be set. This will happen sometime in the middle of the decade.

Wake up, woke: A rajasic force is driving the underprivileged to work hard, against all financial and social odds, to enter IITs, IIMs or the civil services, as a mission. The elite begin to condemn and abuse the system from the protected confines of their privileged addresses. They hate the mass and its political choices -- Narendra Modi is just one such point of hatred -- and they are contemptuous of their religion, their philosophies, their culture, their nation. They will be swept away and turned irrelevant to India; the 2020s will see the beginning of their end.

Ideology: India will rediscover and reshape itself in a billion ways. The deep, vast and puissant philosophies of India, which every Indian household knows and lives from within, will find greater resonance through a rajasic cultural surge. The restrictions of debate to a win-lose binary, with no thought given to a synthesis or expansion of discussion, have left Indian intellectuals playing the chorus to ideologies that no Indian outside a small pretentious and self-serving group can identify with. The 2020s will see an expansion of these ideas.

Media narratives: Traditional media, which had a monopoly of keeping checks on governments, will itself be under scrutiny by anyone with a smartphone; it will break into two -- one that chooses ideology over the institution, the other that will see institutional survival and growth over ideology.

Literature and cinema: Authors exploring ancient India and its philosophical nuances through the medium of storytelling will increase. We saw stories of Shiva and Ram in the 2010s, we will see the Puranas and the Mahabharata in the 2020s.

In short, the 2020s will see the beginning of a return to roots. India's spiritual DNA has driven and informed its civilization. India will remain a vast liberal nation, not in the sense of its Western definition, but a genuine liberalism that has assimilated all peoples, religions and ideas into itself.

"Read together", Chikermane writes, "they give us a picture of an India changing its gears, resetting its priorities, readying for a resurgence. And if there is one invisible theme that threads these journeys into a singular whole, one underlying force that is powering the transformation, it is the rise of a rajasic India".

(The author can be reached at vishnu.makhijani@ians.in)

Exploring the other side of the LoC

Forgotten Kashmir examines the evolution of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) over the past seven decades. It includes major milestones like the tribal invasion in 1947-48, the Sudhan revolt in the 1950s, the Ayub era, the Simla Agreement, the adoption of the Interim Constitution of 1974 and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

It is not simply a historical account but one that analyses the events in PoK against the background of developments in Pakistan's polity and the situation within the area to better understand Pakistan's motivations for its policies in the region.

The book, published by HarperCollins, delves into contentious issues, such as the right of self-determination that is distinct from the concept of plebiscite in Jammu & Kashmir debated in the UN Security Council (UNSC). For a fuller understanding, the issue is examined considering the positions of principal actors, particularly the United Kingdom up to the 1950s, as well as the subsequent evolution of the right of self-determination.

More recently, Chinese presence in the region has grown with the development of the CPEC that runs through the Northern Areas, now renamed Gilgit-Baltistan. The book also covers internal developments in that remote area.

The author, Dinkar P. Srivastava, a seasoned diplomat, provides a wealth of information that comes from his involvement in the Kashmir issue at India's Ministry of External Affairs and discussions at the UN, his stint in Karachi, and as a member of bilateral working groups on counter-terrorism with the US, EU, UK and Canada.

"Much has been written about Jammu & Kashmir. However, very little is known about the other side of the Line of Control (LoC). The purpose of writing this book is to look at Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) in terms of the aspirations of its people and the policies of Pakistan. The yardstick is not the Indian stand, but Pakistan's international commitments and the context of contemporary Pakistan. For better or worse, the destiny of the people of the territory is tied to the evolution of Pakistan's polity. If so, the people of PoK deserve to be treated at least on par with the people of Pakistan," Srivastava says.

"Kashmir is often in the news, though we in India do not often hear about Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. As a result, it could be called 'forgotten' - not in the sense of memory but the absence of a specific strategic perspective. This is the gap that Ambassador Srivastava seeks to fill with this crucial book," said Swati Chopra, Executive Editor, HarperCollins India.

Srivastava joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1976. In 1993-94, as Director (UNP), he was part of successful Indian lobbying efforts against four Pakistani attempts to have resolutions on J&K adopted in the UN General Assembly and the UN Commission on Human Rights. He was involved in the drafting of the National Human Rights Commission statute.

As Joint Secretary (UNP), he participated in Indian lobbying efforts to contain the diplomatic fallout of the Pokhran II nuclear tests and prevent the internationalisation of the J&K issue during the 1999 Kargil war. He dealt with Indian candidature for permanent membership of the UN Security Council, UN peacekeeping and the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. He was a member of Indian delegations to the World Conference on Human Rights in 1993, and the International Court of Justice in the case of the Aerial Incident of 1999 (Pakistan vs India). From 2011-15, as Indian Ambassador to Iran, he negotiated the MoU for Indian participation in Chabahar port. (IANS)

Library on boat

The Kolkata Young Readers' Boat Library, the first such here to give access to children across age groups and segments to pick and read their favourite book while floating on the beautiful Hoogly river, has been launched by the West Bengal Transport Corporation (WBTC) and the Apeejay Anand Children's Library.

The beautiful library, decorated with attractive artworks of children and housing books across genres for young readers adorning its shelves will encourage and inspire children to read and experience the joy of reading.

The famed Oxford BookStores have curated the selection of titles and literature and the boat library will eventually host year-long activities for children on board, such as storytelling, dramatised readings, poetry sessions, book launches, music and more, to captivate young minds.

The Kolkata Young Readers' Boat Library was launched virtually by Rajanvir Singh Kapur, MD, West Bengal Transport Corporation and Priti Paul, Director Apeejay Surendra Group.

"The idea behind the Kolkata Young Readers' Boat Library is that one can read from a good collection of books while appreciating the beauty of Kolkata from the floating marvel on the river Hoogly. The boat library would take people for a nice three-hour trip and there would be a half ticket for children and 'Kanyashrees' (girls aged 18 or below). People over 18 also welcome," Rajanvir Singh Kapur said.

"As a group we have always championed the cause of reading and support all initiatives that reach out to the largest group of young readers. Our collaboration with West Bengal Transport Corporation (WBTC) in this novel venture is one which brings to life our vision," Priti Paul said.

"The river is the life-breath of Bengal and a waterway of tremendous sacred and cultural significance. We celebrate the river with this initiative and, further, reading and learning on the move will undoubtedly create an environment where children can celebrate and re-discover our history and roots as we make our way on board the floating library and delve into books through this educational-recreational endeavour to which we are all so committed," she added. (IANS)

Kumartuli artisan creating country's largest reclining Buddha

By Soudhriti Bhabani

The country's largest reclining Buddha statue which will be 100-feet long is being made in Kolkata.

It is expected to be installed on the occasion of Buddha Purnima this year in Bodh Gaya, its sculptor Mintu Pal told IANS.

The work on the statue is on at the Nainan Bandhab Samiti ground in Baranagar's Ghoshpara area.

The statue will be installed in the temple of Buddha International Welfare Mission in the Bihar holy town.

"We started work in March 2019 but after that we had to put it on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Four months we lost because of that. We resumed operation once again in November last year and we are hopeful the statue will be ready before May 26," Pal said.

He said that it would take three more months to complete the whole fibreglass structure.

"At least 22 artisans are currently involved in the work. We have made concrete base and developed an iron and steel-based structures at the venue as the statue would be permanently in-



stalled at Bodh Gaya," he added.

Pal, who is from Kolkata's famed potter's town Kumartuli, had created a 80-foot tall fibre-glass Durga idol at Deshapriyo Park Ground in south Kolkata in 2015. Over 40 artists had been involved in the project and it took over two months to finish it.

Over Rs 50 lakh was spent on the Durga idol alone. The Durga idol was made in parts and put together and it was also touted as the World's tallest such idol.

Similarly this time around, each part of the reclining Buddha idol is being made separately and they would be taken to Bodh Gaya and put together, Buddha International Welfare Mission's founder secretary Ariyapala Bhikku told IANS.

"We want the installation work to be done this year itself. We have plans to inaugurate the statue on the occasion of Buddha Purnima. But that depends on the work," said Ariyapala.

He claimed that the reclining Buddha statue will be the largest in the country.

"The statue will be carried to Bodh Gaya in parts and installed there by Mintu Pal and his team of artisans only," he added. (IANS)

Reinventing the darker side of life



By Vishnu Makhijani

Her first collection of poems, "Boundless", captured her search for her own identity in her twenties as she built her career and moved from India to London to California. Natasha Malpani Oswal, who, apart from being a poet, is also a content producer and podcast producer, wrote her latest book, "Reinvention" after moving back to India after ten years of living abroad as she grappled with the idea of 'coming home' and 'coming of age'.

"The transition has been both difficult and rewarding. I wrote these poems as I grappled with the idea of coming 'home' and 'coming of age'. Reinvention is my personal diary - it explores the darker side of love, family and ambition," Malpani told IANS in an interview.

"Can we preserve our identity, while being part of multiple families? What sacrifices do we have to make for success? Can we have it all - and keep it?"

"I titled the book 'Reinvention', because it is about the power of embracing and leaning into change. Now I believe we can absolutely keep and amplify our voice - while staying connected to our roots. I think this is a bolder book, and hopefully reflects, post 'Boundless' my own personal growth," she added.

It wasn't an easy journey. "At first, I worried about losing the identity I had worked so hard to

build. This book is about adapting to a new world. Home didn't feel anything like home when I moved back. I transitioned from being an investor to a producer and starting my own company, and adjusting to two families. The changes were huge - but have made me stronger," Malpani explained.

Poetry, she said, "is the most honest and raw form of self-expression. I write poems to both express and understand my own thoughts and feelings. Writing down how I feel helps me see my own life from different perspectives".

She wrote the poems as notes to herself on her phone, "because I wanted to keep the words as sharp and vulnerable as possible. I try to edit myself as little as possible - poetry needs to capture your darkest thoughts and feelings. I put myself out there completely" Malpani elaborated.

To this end, the nine chapters titled "Freedom", "Driven", "Sparkle", "Princess", "Settle", "Restless", "Longing", "Ripe", and "Ties", encompass losing and rebuilding trust and relationships and the dark side of home, love and ambition, because that is what she was exploring at the time.

Sample this poem titled "Family":

We grow/we fight/we love/
we fall/apart/we leave/-come/
back-/to pickup/the pieces/a
guiding/light (house)/the one/
constant/in a/sea/of change.

Or "Best Friend":
You see/me at/my worse/
you don't care-/i tell you/my
darkest/thoughts/-judgement
free-/i know/you'll stay/i know/
this will last/when you/laugh/at
my pain/-perspective-/and i
love/you for it.

"My message is: don't be afraid to choose a different path. Make your own. There are no rules or templates. No one has the answers. Work on getting bolder, better and taking risks: your life expands or shrinks in proportion to your mindset," Malpani asserted.

She hopes "readers are inspired to challenge themselves,

and get bolder and better, instead of settling as we grow older. If anything, 2020 has shown us that change is the only constant. The journey starts when we lean into and embrace uncertainty, instead of fighting it. I hope the honesty and rawness of these poems connects with them".

What next? What's her next project?

"I run a creative house called Boundless Media. We make high quality shows and films that are locally rooted, but resonate globally. Our stories are for and by a new In-

dia. I'm very excited about the slate we have for this year - we have a dark comic show, a feminist film and an animated film coming up soon. We really pour ourselves into our creative projects because I think stories resonate and connect with people when they have truth in them.

"I also have a podcast - so I do get to explore other mediums of storytelling through my work," Malpani concluded.

"Reinvention" has been published by Bloomsbury.

(The author can be reached at vishnu.makhijani@ians.in)



The portrait of a music legend

By Siddhi Jain

Not many know that when renowned Indian classical musician and Padma Vibhushan recipient late Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan was just a child and had difficulties in speech, his father would put him on his chest, face downwards and sing, so he would imitate and try to sing along. The nugget from his inspiring life, and many others, find place in the book 'A Dream I Lived Alone'.

Guru to renowned artists such as Asha Bhosle, Manna Dey, Geeta Dutt Roy, AR Rahman, Hariharan, Waheeda Rahman, Shaan, and Sonu Nigam, among others, the music legend passed away on January 17 at the age of 89 in Bandra.

Performing since he was eight years old, his career spans over a period of seventy-five years.

The book, co-written by the late Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan and his daughter-in-law Namrata Gupta narrates his life's story-from practicing music in a graveyard as a young boy to teaching stalwarts of the music industry.

Calling his journey as lyrical as his songs, the book has an interesting anecdote - one that Namrata counts among her favourite - from when he 'disturbed the dead' for his riyaz (practice) sessions.

"So I would run off to the local graveyard, which was desolate and quiet, a perfect place for me to do my riyaz. I did not have to worry about anybody listening to me, noting the mistakes I made, the false starts, the difficult parts that I would repeat, or even sometimes ignore. I could sing without any inhibition. Today I look back at this period in my life and I see a child sitting inside a dilapidated tomb for

hours, pleased with the shade and the relief from the harsh sun, playing a makeshift tanpura quickly put together by a local carpenter simply employing a metal wire and a piece of bamboo," recalled the award-winning music doyen in the book.

"As I had many events with my father-in-law, a legendary classical vocalist and a guru. I had an opportunity to discuss with him his life story of which I got inspired.

So, I thought his story needed to be penned down in a book. I started noticing his everyday things he did differently in a different way. Then I started noting down all what he shared and discussed with me.

"When I became a part of this culturally rich family as a daughter in law, I found myself in the unique position of being a member of this family as well as someone who could give a fresh look with words in the book

'A Dream I Lived Alone,' Namrata told IANSife.

She adds that the book captures the candid side of his life. "I have written about the man behind the music, the struggle of his life, experiences, and travels which had made him the man which he is today. I have penned the insightful stories of his musical journey, his marriage and his family.

"The thought behind writing this book was to inspire, motivate generations to come, the research and endless attempts for him to open up to me without any inhibitions was challenging and equally rewarding for me," says Namrata, the wife of Rabbani Mustafa, one of the four sons of the music legend.

'A Dream I Lived Alone' is a heart-warming story of love, riyaz, dedication and the maestro of music, Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan. (IANSife)



'Star - Gazing'

By Pt. Ajal Bhambi Sunday, January 31, 2021

Moon trine Mars on your solar return chart and it will give amazing results for the whole year. You will be high in confidence and will appear creative and imaginative. You will appear regal in appearance and your behavior will be royal. You will manage to make heads turn wherever you go. You will interact a lot with members of opposite sex. And will remain in spot light. You will love all the attention you get. You will also get involved in a rollicking affair with a very charming person. It will be a long lasting relation which will turn into marriage. You will have manifold sources of income. Peace and harmony will prevail at your home. Siblings will enjoy excellent rapport with you. And you will keep helping them. Your professional circle will get bigger and wider. You could also get drawn to meditation, yoga or some light form of exercise.

Aries: (March 21 - April 20)
Positive new relationships are formed and you can look forward to good results. It is a friendly time, when it is easy to enjoy life and other people as you instinctively start a new phase in your life. It's time to give your life a makeover, a time of new beginnings and fresh energy. Focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new plans, and exploration. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. A sudden job opportunity or money and property matters could be part of the financial gains. Your physical activities tend to be more intense, passionate, and focused.

Taurus: (April 21 - May 21)
This phase highlights friendship, love, romance and children in your life. You are inspired and could even inspire others. You are thinking more creatively, and express yourself with more sensitivity, compassion, and warmth. You want your objectives to reflect what you are really about, and you are likely to rid yourself of unsatisfying goals. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus helps you achieve what you set out to do. It is the time to coordinate with your creations, love affair, children, and hobbies.

Gemini: (May 22 - June 21)
You are in a position to inspire others through what you create highlighting communication, creativity and authority. Your attitude towards life would be changing; you are no longer willing to make compromises in the important areas of your life, particularly with regards to career and your life path. You would be able to find a way to strike a balance between self-gratification and the obligations of daily life. You are more determined, and it is an excellent time for getting rid of bad habits. Your mind often wanders to domestic concerns, and issues surrounding your home, family, and personal life.

Cancer: (June 22 - July 22)
You give a new approach to communications projects, learning, or self-expression. Your most natural talents would meet with reward and acceptance. A new project or goal begun now has a good chance of being successful and long lasting. This is a good time for reflection, prayer, and meditation. A higher purpose to your life is what you seek, and you rely more heavily upon your intuition in order to achieve it. Your self-confidence and positive attitude will reward you. Positive connections with others can be made fairly easily. A comfortable level of personal popularity helps to keep conflict to a minimum.

Leo: (July 23 - August 23)
This phase brings an exciting job offer, reward, recognition or a possible promotion. An opportunity to expand on a worldly level arrives now. A balanced approach to life, in terms of realistic expectations, is the best approach for maximizing success. People are bound to recognize your leadership skills and talents. You want your life path and your objectives to reflect what you're really about. You benefit from being more decisive than usual, and your ability to concentrate and focus help you to achieve what you set out to do in the coming weeks. You are more enthusiastic and ready for adventure. It's also a good time for expressing your creativity.

Virgo: (August 24 - September 22)
This is a period of work and development. It's a time to deal with practical matters, and it's not a time to be lazy or especially gregarious. It can be a time that feels hard, monotonous and lonely. Try to get yourself organized, work to build your

resources, keep busy. You might find that you are very often encouraging and supportive of others. Certainly, you are more accepting and understanding of your friends and loved ones. Being content in love will figure and will attract positive circumstances into your life. It is likely to be a rather lighthearted time, when opportunities are greater than usual.

Libra: (September 23 - October 23)
There will be a wave good-luck in love and romance. You spend great time in long conversations, phone calls, short trips and enjoy the feeling of togetherness. You are more receptive and gentle on a romantic level, and tend to be sentimental about work commitments. Business expansion and new professional opportunities are worth considering. Financial success is stronger than earlier. You may explore new technology and improve office infrastructure as this brings more efficiency and creativity on your work in an unconventional way. Positive new relationships are formed.

Scorpio: (October 24 - November 22)
You might have a more materialistic view of life and are more attracted to objects and possessions that give you a sense of comfort and status. There are greater monetary gains too. You, probably should be aware of a tendency to create your own financial stress due to extravagant spending habits. Your main focus is on personal freedom, reaching out to others, making new friends, and exploration. You are enthusiastic and ready for adventure. This is a time to do what you can to build trust in your family life and a strong foundation within yourself.

Sagittarius: (November 23 - December 21)
You might play attention to various ways to increase personal funds, resulting in more than one avenue for monetary gain. You are more friendly, optimistic, and big-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. Financial benefits may come your way. You may find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well. If you are patient and open yourself up in a gentle manner, you will attract both things and people. Be patient, be receptive and enjoy the peace.

Capricorn: (December 22 - January 20)
You enjoy decisions in your favour when it comes to legal affairs, education, and travel. Financial benefits may come your way. You may find that you have the right information at the right time. You could also have big ideas and plans. Work, especially in communications, goes well. Love matters, finances, and social relationships are especially pleasing and satisfying. You are generally more cooperative, although occasional willfulness could be a downfall, if you succumb to it. New friendships, or new spins on established connections, are in your forecast.

Aquarius: (January 21 - February 18)
Your efforts would be rewarded and praised by people in authority as you resolve issues related to finances and budgets. You are bound to enjoy increased social opportunities as well as a boost in your personal popularity and magnetism. Others look on you favorably. You are more friendly, optimistic, and big-hearted than usual. A cheerful and hopeful outlook increases your chances of gaining cooperation from others. This is a sociable, and perhaps self-indulgent, time when the pursuit of pleasure is one of your high priorities. Security in love is likely to figure and to attract positive circumstances into your life.

Pisces: (February 19 - March 20)
The planetary combination boosts your professional prospects as you communicate cleverly and interact in a more positive way with people. You express true feelings, ideas and plans without being afraid of the consequences and try to please your loved one. You enjoy every moment, whatever it brings and follow your truth and intuition to feel more integrated with your loved one. Married people should take care of family members as the health of a family member may suffer. You tend to get mentally stressed and anxious causing health problems, detach yourself from problems and view them from a different perspective. Meditation and daily prayers would help to overcome the recently generated problems.

Sports and Physical Fitness as Career

By Ranjan K Baruah

To make an energetic career it's important to have good health from childhood. Physical fitness and a healthy body is important for our growth and this is needed from childhood till we live. Nowadays in the days of modernity where things are becoming more commercial and educational institutions are also becoming sophisticated. It is good that exercise and fitness programmes are included in curriculum or as co curricular activities in educational institutions so that every child or students can grow well.

One of the careers which can be linked with this is a career in sports and physical fitness. Sports are also important for the all development of an individual. Not necessary that everyone will play for the competitions but to remain fit it's good to play. Some can take up sports and physical fitness as a career too.

A career in sports and physical fitness is a unique occupation. One can remain fit and also earn money through this profession.

Apart from being a profession, sports has the potential to build character- concepts such as self discipline, teamwork, sacrifice and fair play can be learned and enhanced through athletic competition.

Sports and Physical Fitness together includes Sports Media, Sports Team Administration, Sports Medicine and Sports Management. Sports media include Marketing, Broadcasting, Sport Writing, Public Relations, Photography, etc. Team Administration includes postings such as Coach, Instructor, Referee, Athletic Director, Physical Trainer (PT) etc. in high schools, colleges, universities and for professional teams.

Medicine includes Sports Rehabilitation & Orthopedics, Athletic Training, Sports Nutrition, Sports Psychologist etc. Sports Management include Management and Finance, Organising leagues etc. as team manager. One of the largest sports job sectors is health and fit-

ness. There are plenty of opportunities for health and fitness jobs where professional sportsmen and women, as well as amateur athletes require training and conditioning.

There are also various scholarships provided for those interested in sports in order to sharpen their talents.

Sports persons on retiring from active play can also look forward to satisfying jobs in assignments such as umpires and referees.

In our country Spas and yoga centers have grown like mushrooms in most of the urban, suburban and

course with graduation respectively.

There are also Graduate and Post graduate programs in Physical fitness, sports medicine etc. for which the requirement is graduation. For BSc courses sciences stream is essential but in many other courses students from any stream can join if they are selected.

Many talented sports persons are employed in railways, government sector enterprises or with the private sector that they represent in the sporting event/game in various tournaments and matches. Sportspeople get exposure at national level or international sporting events.



semi-urban areas. The increase in demand of style brings more opportunities for people who are trained in physical fitness

Some of the courses are like B.Sc. in Physical Education, Bachelor of Physical Education (B.P.Ed), Bachelor of Physical Education and Sports Sciences (BPES), Post Graduate Diploma in Sports Management (P.G.D.S.M), Post Graduate Diploma in Sports Medicine (P.G.D.S. Medicine), etc. Apart from this there are diplomas courses and certificates courses are available.

For graduate level programs as well as certificate courses, 10+2 is required. To enter into a teaching position, Bachelor of Physical Education (B.P.Ed) or Master of Physical Education is required, the former is a 3 year course with 10+2 as eligibility to enter while the latter is a 2 year

Sport and fitness is a rapidly expanding field, offering many opportunities for a wide range of careers, from playing or coaching in your chosen sport to managing sports centres or health clubs.

To excel in any sports hard work and regular practises are must and if planned and practised properly one can become a good sportsman and bring glory to the state or to the country.

In recent years many sports person from the North East have done well at national or international level. There are opportunities available for us as sports person or as physical fitness professionals.

(The author is a career mentor and skill trainer and can be reached at bkranjan@gmail.com or 8473943734)